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“You don’t seek help, You are just thankful for the things the country provides for you.” The Emotional Burden of Growing up Undocumented in the United States

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“You Don’t Seek Help, You are Just Thankful for the Things the Country Provides for You.”

The Emotional Burden of Growing up Undocumented in the United States

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the immigrant young adults living in the United States without permanent legal status. You are heard. You are valuable. You are American in every way that counts.

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Abstract

For over a decade, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program has provided more than 800,000 undocumented young adults with the ability to lawfully reside in the United States. Despite the program's benefits, DACA falls short of offering long-term security and full societal integration. Over the past few years, political and legal attacks on the DACA program (e.g., actions of the former Trump administration, 2017 DACA recission, ongoing court proceedings) have made visible the precarious nature of the program and threatened the futures of young adults protected under the program. While prior studies have found that the growing anti-immigrant national climate has increased a host of negative emotions among Dacamented young adults, it is less understood how DACA recipients cope with, and manage, their negative emotions. This dissertation unpacks the emotional well-being – and coping strategies – of DACA recipients as they navigate uncertain and hostile political and legal terrain. The overarching research question guiding this dissertation is: What factors – and how do these factors - shape the emotional well-being of immigrant young adults who navigate the transition to adulthood in liminal legality? To address this question, I draw from both surveys and semi-structured interviews of 106 undocumented young adults, with DACA, who navigate the transition to adulthood during a particularly tumultuous 5-year political and legal era. Findings reveal that a complex web of structural, cultural, social, familial, and individual factors shape the emotional well-being and coping strategies of young adults who transition to adulthood in liminal legality. Overall, this study provides a foundation for future research, theoretical redevelopment, and policy initiatives that invest in the lives of this vulnerable population of young adults.

Chapter 1:

Introduction

"We're walking on shells every single day because we can't do anything bad or else they'll take our permission to be here, to work here, and to go to school here".
(Jason, 21-year-old male, DACA recipient)

Jason's words capture the precarious nature of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program (DACA). While Jason has been able to work, go to school, and lawfully reside in the United States, the temporary nature of DACA leaves him in constant fear of making a mistake that could cost him the life he has built. Jason is one of over 800,000 undocumented young adults who have received DACA since the program's inception in 2012 (Bruno 2021). An executive action by the former Obama presidential administration, DACA was created to provide eligible undocumented young adults[1] with several temporary benefits (e.g., work permit, social security number) and deferral of deportation. While program recipients are able to lawfully reside in the United States, their temporary status does not provide a pathway to citizenship, blocking full integration into society (Hamilton, Patler, and Savinar 2021). In addition, young adults with DACA have to pay $495 every 2-years to renew their status[2], with no guarantee their renewal will be granted. Moreover, the temporary rights and protection from deportation only

[1] Instituted on June 15, 2012 by the Obama administration, the DACA program offers temporary protections to eligible undocumented young adults. To be eligible, applicants must (1) have migrated to the United States before they turned 16 years old and; (2) be 30 years old or younger when DACA was initiated on August 15, 2012; (3) have lived within the United States consistently since June 15, 2002 or before; (4) have lived in the United States for a minimum of five years; (5) attend school, have graduated from high school, have a GED, or served in the military and been honorably discharged; and (6) have no felonies, major misdemeanors, or multiple misdemeanors.
[2] In 2020, a memorandum by Secretary Wolf reduced the 2-year renewals to yearly.

covers the recipient and does not extend to their family members, oftentimes increasing family responsibilities (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021) and fears of deportation for family members who are undocumented (Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017).

Despite the program's limitations, it is important to acknowledge the positive impacts that DACA has had on the lives of undocumented young adults. Specifically, the benefits (e.g., work permit, social security number) afforded to recipients help facilitate social integration through increased opportunities for employment and education (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszcyk 2014). In the short term, DACA appeared not only to improve life outcomes but also the emotional well-being of recipients (Patler et al. 2019). However, in 2015, just 3 years after the program's enactment, the emotional benefits of DACA began to disappear, replaced with growing concerns over the time-limited and precarious nature of the DACA program (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales et al. 2018; Roth 2019). For young adults with DACA, navigating life in liminality (i.e., in the margins) contributes to feelings of fear, hopelessness, and uncertainty for the future (Del Real 2019; Gonzales 2011; Gonzales et al. 2018; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017).

Over the past few years, the emotional health of undocumented young adults – including those with DACA - has worsened due to the increasingly anti-immigrant political and social contexts. Post-2015 political and legal actions, like the anti-immigrant platform of the former Trump administration, the 2017 DACA recission, and ongoing court proceedings, have contested the program's legitimacy and made visible the temporary state that over half a million young adults live in. These actions have had devastating consequences on the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults with DACA. As prior research shows, navigating the transition to adulthood during the former Trump administration contributed to a host of negative emotional

health outcomes including depression, anxiety, and fear (Moreno et al. 2021). Moreover, the recission of DACA led to a heightened fear of deportation (Nienhusser and Oshio 2019) and "… represents a threat to public mental health" (Venkataramani et al. 2017:3; see also Mallet and Garcia Bedolla 2019). Coupled with the growing anti-immigrant social and legal discourse, the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the stigma and marginalization of *being undocumented* in the United States. For individuals without permanent legal status, the COVID-19 pandemic created financial insecurity, contributed to challenges at school, and adversely impacted the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults (Andrade 2021; Enriquez et al. 2021).

This dissertation focuses on the voices of 106 undocumented young adults with DACA who navigate life after high school during a particularly tumultuous political, legal, and social era[3]. Taking place between 2017 – 2021, this project unpacks the factors that shape the emotional well-being of DACA recipients as they confront an increasingly hostile anti-immigrant national context (e.g., actions of the former Trump administration, 2017 DACA recission). Their stories not only shape the findings but also guide the overarching goal for this work – to draw attention to their pressing – and often unmet – emotional health needs. To this aim, the central question of this dissertation asks: What factors – and how do these factors - shape the emotional well-being of immigrant young adults who navigate the transition to adulthood in liminal legality? By employing both the *liminal legality* (Menjívar 2006) and transition to adulthood frameworks, this dissertation advances theoretical and empirical knowledge about the emotional well-being of young adults who live in legal limbo.

[3] This dissertation emerges from a larger NSF project. For study description, see data and methods section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition to "Illegality"

Unlike their documented peers, "coming of age" for young adults without legal status brings more restrictions than opportunities. While sharing similar life expectations and aspirations as their documented peers in high school, those without legal status confront a myriad of challenges after leaving the "protection" of K-12 schooling (Plyler vs. Doe 1982). For young adults without permanent legal status, the *transition to "illegality"*[4] presents barriers to attaining adult status (Gonzales 2011), oftentimes limiting educational (Ábrego 2006) and career (Ábrego and Gonzales 2010) opportunities. Undocumented young adults who attend college often confront financial barriers and burdens (Ábrego 2006; Ábrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales and Burciaga 2018; Shi et al. 2018), psychological and social burdens (Cervantes, Minero, and Brito 2015; O'Neal et al. 2016; Terriquez 2015), and difficulties acquiring critical social capital needed for success in college (Bjorklund 2018). In addition, entering the workforce without a social security number or work permit may lead to low paying jobs and poor, and even dangerous working conditions (Goździak and Russell-Jenkins 2019).

While the lack of permanent legal status has been found to impede pathways to gaining adult status, the *construction of "illegality"* also impacts how undocumented young adults are viewed in society. For example, undocumented young adults are vulnerable to discrimination fueled by the racialized immigration policies that construct their status (Aranda and Vaquera 2015). Furthermore, the stigma of "*illegality"* poses challenges in the personal lives of

[4] Aligned with prior research, the concept of "illegality" refers to the nation state's exclusionary practices toward immigrants (De Genova 2002; Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013) which creates both legal and social barriers to integration in society (Ábrego and Lakhani 2015; Menjívar 2006; Menjívar and Ábrego 2012).

undocumented young adults, adversely impacting both romantic relationships (Enriquez 2020) and friendships (Cho 2021).

Even for young adults with DACA, the pathway to adulthood is filled with obstacles – as their lack of citizenship leaves them ineligible for federal financial aid for higher education (Roth 2019) and even limits the types of jobs they can hold (Smith 2019). Currently, DACA recipients are ineligible for in-state tuition waivers and state-based aid in five states: Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin. In addition, young adults with DACA who live in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina are left with few options for college – as these three states strictly prohibit undocumented young adults, along with DACA recipients, from applying to specific colleges (Higher Ed Immigration Portal 2023). Moreover, the growing anti-immigrant stance taken by Florida government officials, the state in which this study was conducted, threatens the college futures of undocumented young adults, including those with DACA. The tuition equity bill that was passed in 2014, which provides out-of-state tuition waivers for undocumented students who have attended at least three years of high school in Florida, is now under attack (American Immigration Council 2023). Therefore, navigating the transition to adulthood with DACA can present serious obstacles to attaining adult status, leaving young adults grappling with a host of negative emotions (Patler et al. 2019; Aranda et al. 2023).

Emotional Well-Being of Undocumented Young Adults

Prior research has explored the impact of legal and social exclusion on the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults (Enriquez, Hernandez, and Ro 2018; Gonzales Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). During the transition to adulthood, undocumented young adults experience feelings of fear, anxiety, and depression (Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Raymond-Flesch et al. 2014; Vaquera,

Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). For example, the work of Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti (2013) reveals the compounding impact of exclusion from typical "coming of age" life events. Specifically, the young adults shared that "… the discovery of the undocumented status, along with the exposure to experiences of stigmatization and discrimination led to internalizing the self-stigma of being '*illegal*' with immense consequences for their identity, relationships, and mental health" (Gonzales et al. 2013:1186; see also: Patler and Pirtle 2018; Patler et al. 2019).

While the DACA program alleviates the uncertainty of accessing higher education and the workforce at the nation-state level (with variations by states), this temporary status gives rise to a new set of stressors (Fiorito 2021). For example, the work of Roth (2019) shows that while DACA recipients may access college, the financial uncertainty that comes with paying for college still exists. Furthermore, scholarship has produced mixed findings in relation to the benefits of having DACA on emotional well-being. While some scholars find that DACA improves emotional health by providing temporary benefits and opportunities (Giuntella and Lonsky 2020; Patler and Pirtle 2018; Venkataramani et al. 2017), others emphasize the unintended burdens that having DACA introduces (Siemons et al. 2017; Sudhinaraset et al. 2017; Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021). For the latter, DACA recipients have expressed fear for family members who are still undocumented and at risk for deportation (Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). Additionally, DACA recipients often experience an increase in family responsibilities, carrying both care-taking and financial burdens (Aranda, Vaquera and Castañeda 2021; Siemons et al. 2017). Even for DACA recipients who expressed positive emotions toward their DACA status, these feelings are often short-lived, as the precariousness of the temporary status contributes to feelings of uncertainty (Patler et al. 2019; Aranda et al. 2023).

Furthermore, navigating transitions to adulthood during times of political and social uncertainty contributes to the emotional burden of being undocumented in the United States (Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021). Prior research finds that DACA-eligible individuals express worsening health after 2015, both during the political election, the Trump presidency (Patler et al. 2019), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Andrade 2021). The former Trump administration not only ushered in a time of anti-immigrant rhetoric but also threatened the legal protections and rights of DACA recipients (Pierce and Selee 2017). Arguably, one of his most extreme stances against immigration, the 2017 recission of DACA jeopardized the futures of over 800,000 young adults who had spent most, if not all, of their formative years in the U.S. Faced with the threat of losing their status and the ability to lawfully reside in the U.S., young adults with DACA experienced a host of negative emotions including anxiety and fear (Aranda et al. 2023; Moreno et al. 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Liminal Legality

Scholars argue that legal status is legally and socially constructed and not a human characteristic (De Genova 2002; Flores and Schachter 2018). Therefore, legal status is defined by the country-specific immigration laws and policies that function to exclude individuals from legal and social spaces. To move beyond the legal-illegal binary, Cecilia Menjívar (2006) offers the concept of *liminal legality* to address the "grey area" between having documented status or being undocumented (Cebulko 2014). Moreover, *liminal legality* is not perceived as a legal status in and of itself, but rather a precarious space that anyone without citizenship can find themselves within as immigration laws and policies are constantly in flux (Menjívar 2006). Prior research finds that individuals without the full rights afforded to citizens often feel "in-between",

not being a part of their host society nor their country of origin (Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014). Furthermore, young adults with temporary rights and protections confront challenges when leaving high school (Gonzales 2011), navigating college spaces (Valadez et al. 2021), and navigating life post-college (Morales Hernandez and Enriquez 2021).

Prior research has applied the concept of *liminal legality* to help explain the challenges that individuals without citizenship confront, including those with temporary protected status (TPS), visa holders, and DACA recipients. Scholars have argued that the precarity of temporary statuses reflects a form of *legal violence* (Menjívar and Ábrego 2012). Specifically, "(l)egal violence … is embedded in the body of law that, while purports to have the positive objective of protecting rights or controlling behavior for the general good, simultaneously gives rise to practices that harm a particular social group" (Menjívar and Ábrego 2012:1387). As an example, and pertinent to this study, DACA recipients receive temporary rights and protections, like deferral of deportation, a work permit, and social security number. However, the benefits afforded through the DACA program are not lasting and do not facilitate permanent integration into society (Hamilton, Patler, and Savinar 2021). Not fully undocumented nor a citizen, DACA recipients live in a state of liminal legality, which "…shapes different spheres of life – the immigrant's immediate sphere of social networks and family, the community-level place of religious institutions in the immigrants' lives and the broader domain of artistic expression" (Menjívar 2006:1000).

Transition to Adulthood

The developmental shifts from childhood to adolescence to adulthood all mark important transitions in the life course. As a "normative" standard, directed toward white middle-class young adults, becoming an adult is not a single event, but rather occurs in a series of events,

commonly referred to as the *Big Five*: completing college, securing employment, moving out of the family home, entering into marriage, and parenthood (Arnett 2014; Settersten, Ottusch, and Schneider 2015). Specifically, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is viewed as a time when individuals rely less on their parents' support and begin to make decisions on their own (Arnett 1998). Recent scholarship has often focused on *financial independence* as the marker of gaining adult status (Bea and Yi 2019). While independence has often served as a symbol of adulthood, how quickly one can reach adult status is shaped not only by their own agency but also the societal and cultural norms of age-graded transitions to adulthood (Macmillan 2006). Specifically, prior research has found a generational effect, where young adults growing up in different time periods may experience early or late transitions to adulthood (Hareven and Masaoka 1988; Settersten and Ray 2010). Therefore, it has been argued that transitions to adulthood are not fixed but rather dynamic, contingent upon the economic and social opportunities and constraints during the time and place in which young adults live (Arnett 1998; Berlin, Furstenberg, and Waters 2010).

To address the heterogenous pathways to gaining adult status, Arnett (2000) proposes the life-course stage of "emerging adulthood", a liminal period between adolescence and adulthood. According to Arnett (2000), "(e)merging adulthood… is a period characterized by change and exploration for most people, as they examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews" (479; see also Arnett 2007, 2014). Specifically, the developmental stage of "emerging adulthood" is not universal but rather varies based on a variety of macro, meso, and micro-level factors including (but not limited to): cultural, historical, family characteristics and relationships, and identity formation (Wood et al. 2018). For example, scholars find that while young adults, regardless of social class

backgrounds, aspire to attain adult status, those from less advantaged backgrounds often meet expectations earlier as they immediately go to work (Silva 2016). Consequently, young adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds are often not afforded the advantage of lingering in "emerging adulthood" as they tend to juggle a variety of family responsibilities and financial demands (Sánchez et al. 2010).

For young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds, the transition to adulthood does not follow the "normative" standard but rather varies based on a variety of social locations, like social class (Lareau 2011; Lareau and Weininger 2008), race/ethnicity (Arnett 2003; Lei and South 2016), and immigrant status (Aranda, Vaquera and Castañeda 2021; Diaz-Strong 2020). Prior research finds that young adults from working-class families often experience earlier transitions to adulthood (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edlin 2016; Johnson and Reynolds 2013), express more feelings of financial insecurity (Luhr 2018), and may lack access to non-familial mentors that can help facilitate transitions to adulthood (Raposa et al. 2018). Furthermore, working class parents often lack the institutional knowledge and involvement needed to help their children navigate the educational system (Lareau and Cox 2011).

Aside from social class, racial and ethnic minorities confront obstacles when transitioning to adulthood (Lee et al. 2018). Recent data reports that 10.5% of white young adults between 18-24 were neither employed nor in school, whereas 14.8% of Hispanic young adults and 19.9% of Black young adults were neither employed nor in school (National Center for Education Statistics 2019). Aligned with these statistics, prior research has explored the racial and ethnic disparities in education and the workplace (e.g., Espinosa et al. 2019; McDaniel and Kuehn 2013). For example, Black college students are more likely to drop out of college and incur greater amounts of debt, as compared to both white and other minority students (Espinosa et al.

2019). Furthermore, Black young adults who hold a high school diploma work as much as white young adults without a diploma (McDaniel and Kuehn 2013).

For immigrant young adults, the transition to adulthood presents a variety of challenges as they navigate spaces of both social and legal exclusion (Cebulko 2014; Diaz-Strong 2020; Gonzales 2011). Compared to their native-born peers, both documented and undocumented immigrant young adults have expressed a lack of control over their own futures (Cebulko 2014). Furthermore, the precarity of navigating the transition to adulthood without permanent legal status blocks access to both educational and employment opportunities (Ábrego and Gonzales 2010). For DACA recipients, the temporary rights and protection from deportation provide young adults with more opportunities, and at the same time, contribute to increased familial expectations and responsibilities (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021). In addition, the changing political climate highlights the impermanence of DACA, creating both social and emotional burdens for young adults at the margins of legality (Burciaga and Malone 2021; Gonzales, Brant, and Roth 2020; Nienhusser and Oshio 2020).

Combined, these frameworks help contextualize the post-high school lives of immigrant young adults who navigate the transition to adulthood in liminal legality. Framing the overarching goal of this dissertation, and the aims of each individual data chapter, the liminal legality and transition to adulthood frameworks are leveraged to gain deeper insight into what factors – as well as how these factors – shape the emotional well-being of DACA recipients.

RESEARCH AIMS AND STUDY CONTRIBUTIONS

It is clear that post-2015 actions – including the 2016 presidential election, 2017 DACA recission, and ongoing court proceedings challenging the program's legitimacy – have detrimental impacts on the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults (Moreno et al.

2021; Patler et al. 2019; Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021). These anti-immigrant actions have threatened the security, belonging, and health of undocumented young adults protected under the DACA program. What is not so clear is how young adults with DACA cope with, and manage, their negative emotions in the face of political, social, and legal uncertainty (for exception, see Aranda et al. 2023). This dissertation project aims to address this underexplored area by asking: What factors – and how do these factors – shape the emotional well-being of DACA recipients as they make the transition into adulthood? Broadly, this dissertation is guided by the goal of uncovering the factors that both mitigate and exacerbate their negative emotional states. To this aim, the three stand-alone data chapters (Chapters 2 – 4) explore the various factors that shape emotional well-being. Specifically, Chapter 2 asks: *How* and *why* perceptions of control shape the emotional well-being of DACA recipients? Chapter 3 asks: *What* factors prevent young adults with DACA from seeking formal care to cope with negative emotions – and *how* (if at all) they are able to overcome these barriers. Lastly, Chapter 4 asks: *How* do young adults with DACA define and experience social belonging – and *the ways in* which social belonging relates to their emotional well-being? To address these questions and gain deeper insight into the underlying processes shaping their emotional health and coping strategies, the stories of 106 DACA recipients will guide this dissertation project.

DATA AND METHODS

Study

Through my involvement as a research assistant on the NSF Grant (No.1729396) titled "*Ontological Security in Uncertain Times: Legal Status and the Social and Emotional Well-Being of Undocumented Young Adults",* I became inspired by the stories of young adults interviewed for this study. Alongside the Co-PIs, Dr. Elizabeth Aranda (USF), Dr. Elizabeth

Vaquera (GWU), and Dr. Heide Castañeda (USF) and the rest of the research team, we sought to explore both the social and emotional well-being of young adults, without permanent legal status, as they transitioned to adulthood during times of political and social uncertainty. Beginning in 2017, this mixed-methods project employed both online surveys and semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences and well-being of young adults without permanent legal status in the United States. To ensure the confidentiality of participants and meet the guidelines set forth by the university's institutional review board (IRB)[5], participants provided verbal consent, pseudonyms were used in place of identifiable information, and all data was retained in a single virtual location that was accessible only to researchers.

In total, 116 young adults were included in this study. Participants ranged in age between 18 and 32 years old and none had permanent legal status. From the 116 participants, 106 had temporary protections under the DACA program, 9 were completely undocumented, and 1 was in the process of applying for political asylum. Specifically, the quantitative sample is comprised of 60 young adults without permanent legal status who live in the United States. Participants were asked a variety of questions regarding their legal status, sociodemographic characteristics, parents' background, emotional well-being, and community involvement (for example). In addition, interviews were conducted with 56 young adults, without permanent legal status, who lived in the Central Florida region. Interviews included both open-ended questions and scales that were included in the online survey, prompting participants to share information about their migration journeys, living situations, demographic information, family dynamics, emotional well-being, and life goals (for example). To review the interview guide in its entirety, please refer to Appendix C. Beginning in 2020, participants in the qualitative sample were re-contacted

[5] For IRB approval letters, refer to Appendices A and B.

for follow-up interviews. The re-interview process concluded in August 2021, with half of participants being re-interviewed (n = 28). Specifically, these follow-up interviews offered insight into the ways, if at all, life had changed since we last spoke with them. In addition to asking about their relationships, education and/or work, and living situations (for example), participants were asked to share their feelings about the changes in political administration and the COVID-19 pandemic and how they experienced both. To view the follow-up interview guide, please refer to Appendix D.

Interviews, field notes, and reflections. Since joining the project in January 2021, I have been actively engaged in the recruitment and re-interview process. At the conclusion of the re-interview process in August 2021, I conducted 20 semi-structured re-interviews. Furthermore, I have been involved in a variety of post-interview stages, including writing field notes, transcribing, audio checking, de-identifying transcripts, and coding interviews.

Sample

Emerging from the NSF project, this dissertation focuses on a subset of undocumented young adults –those with DACA – to capture the factors that shape their emotional well-being as they transition to adulthood in liminal legality. In total, 106 DACA recipients are included in the sample. Out of the 106 participants, 55 completed the online survey. While over two-thirds migrated from Mexico, DACA recipients hailed from 11 other Latin American countries[6], as well as Poland and the Philippines. In addition, over half of DACA recipients (63) self-identified as female, 35 identified as male, and 1 identified as gender nonconforming. DACA recipients in

[6] Most respondents were born in Mexico (73), but they also represent 11 other Latin American countries: Argentina (3), Bolivia (3), Brazil (1), Chile (1), Costa Rica (2), Colombia (5), Dominican Republic (1), Ecuador (3), Guatemala (2), Honduras (1), and Peru (9).

this study had lived in the U.S. between 12 to 31 years – with most spending more than half of their lives integrated in American society.

Methodological Approach for Dissertation

Research paradigm. A multi-epistemological lens is applied to gain a deeper, more nuanced, understanding of the factors that underlie the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults protected under DACA. Specifically, this dissertation acknowledges the existence of a *reality*, a reality where laws, politics, and media exclude and criminalize im(migrants), and specifically, undocumented individuals. However, the ways in which undocumented individuals *experience* spaces of both legal and social exclusion varies. Therefore, lived experiences are centered to explore the *realities* that are constructed (and co-constructed) by, and between, undocumented young adults with DACA as they *experience* the transition to adulthood.

Instruments, tools, and research procedures. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are leveraged to deepen our understanding of the emotional well-being of DACA recipients during a pivotal time in their developmental life-course. Specifically, quantitative scales are used to provide a first step in exploring the factors related to their emotional well-being. To measure emotional well-being, I used the scale developed by Mroczek and Kolarz (1998) as discussed in Chapters 2 and 4. In addition, I used the locus of control scale (Lachman and Weaver 1998) employed in Chapter 2, and social well-being scale (Keyes 1998) used in Chapter 4, to investigate the relationships between perceived control and emotional well-being, and feelings of social well-being and emotional well-being. A detailed list of items and response options appear in Appendix E, F, and G.

While these scales provide a useful first step in exploring *what* factors are related to the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults, quantitative methods remain silent about

how and *why these relationships exist*. Therefore, I also leveraged semi-structured interviews to uncover the multi-layered emotional experiences of this sample of DACA recipients living in the Central Florida region. At a fundamental level, qualitative methods are crucial to better understanding the experiences of people as "… situational and evolving through interaction" (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2016:13). By providing a space for young adults with DACA to share their stories, rather than selecting a value on a survey, we can gain a richer account of how the *experience* of being undocumented shapes their transitions to adulthood and emotional health.

Data analysis. The following sections elaborate on the utility of leveraging both qualitative and quantitative analytic tools when exploring the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults as they transition to adulthood. While the qualitative interviews are central to analysis, the quantitative scales and items are included to further enrich our understanding of the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA, as they navigate the transition to adulthood.

Qualitative interviews. A widely used analytic tool across a variety of disciplines, *thematic analysis* offers researchers a roadmap when embarking on the process of *coding*, *grouping*, and *theming* qualitative data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Castleberry and Nolen 2018). Despite its popularity in analyzing qualitative data, there are different types of thematic analysis (e.g., codebook, coding reliability, reflexive). Therefore, researchers should clearly define the parameters of their thematic analysis to avoid ambiguity (Braun and Clarke 2020). For example, there are two types of thematic approaches: inductive or theoretical. While inductive approaches are flexible in nature and develop themes based on what is shared in the interviews, theoretical approaches rely on preconceived notions of the data and structured research questions (Braun

and Clarke 2006). Furthermore, researchers can employ thematic analysis to identify both semantic and/or latent themes in the qualitative data (Joffe 2012), While *the words spoken* represent the semantic themes, *the words unspoken* reflect latent themes. Therefore, it can be argued, that thematic analysis is not a clear-cut approach but rather requires researchers to be reflexive and intentional at every phase of analysis.

Therefore, I employ *reflexive thematic analysis* to better understand the emotional experiences of my participants. From this perspective, "(a)nalysis… is a situated interpretative reflexive process" (Braun and Clarke 2020:333-334) where themes do not simply emerge from the data but rather are produced through researchers' interpretations. Therefore, I acknowledge that the process of coding, grouping, and theming is both an inductive *and* deductive process, where the structured nature of interview questions, my positionality, and personal interpretations of the interviews all contribute to the development of themes. Furthermore, I seek to reveal and unpack both semantic *and* latent themes, through a process of reflection of what these young adults shared and what was left unsaid.

Quantitative scales and items. In two chapters of this dissertation (see summaries for Chapters 2 and 4), I employ a series of descriptive and inferential statistics. In Chapter 2, I use the locus of control scale (Lachman and Weaver 1998), along with several socio-demographic characteristics, to explore if, and to what extent, perceptions of control over one's life relates to the self-reported emotional well-being of DACA recipients. In addition to descriptive statistics, I employ a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to examine the potential relationship between perceived control and emotional well-being. In Chapter 4, I use the social well-being scale (Keyes 1998), along with several socio-demographic characteristics, to explore the potential relationship between social well-being (including social belonging).and emotional

well-being. In addition to descriptive statistics, a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were used to evaluate if, and to what extent, feelings of social belonging relate to the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA in this sample.

In the following sections, I detail both ethical considerations and my own positionality.

Ethical Considerations

When engaging in research with marginalized populations, it is crucial to consider the ethical implications of revealing personal information, as this may compromise the safety of our participants. Along with the Co-PIs of the larger NSF project, we took several steps to ensure the confidentiality of our participants by replacing all personal information (e.g., names, neighborhoods, schools, etc.) with pseudonyms. Furthermore, all interviews and surveys were saved in a single location that could only be accessed by the co-PIs and research assistants on the project. In addition, we remained mindful of the sensitive nature of the interview and survey questions as participants were asked to share their stories with us. During interviews, participants were asked questions about their migration journey that could elicit emotional responses as participants reflected on difficult times in their lives. As we aimed to prioritize their comfort, we checked in with participants at multiple points during the interview to make sure they felt comfortable answering questions, if they wanted to take a break, move away from a topic, or if they wanted to end the interview.

Around twenty-four hours after the interview, we checked back in with our participants to see how they were feeling and if we could provide them with any resources or support. Through conversations with the co-PIs, several staff members and counselors at the University of South Florida (USF), and my own internet searches, I developed a working document that included a list of health providers serving immigrant and marginalized communities in both the Tampa and

Orlando areas. This served as one of several resources we used to connect our participants to immigrant organizations and immigrant friendly providers that could help support them in their journeys. Furthermore, we acknowledge the delicate nature of conducting research with undocumented populations. Navigating spaces of both legal and social exclusions, undocumented young adults confront a largely anti-immigrant discourse that operates to criminalize and exploit immigrants, especially those without permanent legal status. Being mindful of this, both survey and interview participants received monetary incentives.

Positionality

As a white female, U.S. born citizen, it is not possible for me to fully understand the experiences of undocumented immigrant young adults. However, it is possible for me to provide a space for them to *tell their stories*. As a facilitator for UndocuALLY, a training program at USF that aims to inform our campus community about the experiences of undocumented students and the challenges they confront when transitioning to adulthood, I take an active role in facilitating conversations about how we, as allies, can help foster a supportive campus environment. Furthermore, I have been, and continue to be, involved in conversations to expand the training program at all USF campuses and to create a second training focused on ally development. Aside from being an UndocuALLY facilitator, I served as an executive board member of UndocUnited, a student organization at USF that aims to provide a supportive space for students who are undocumented or have temporary statuses, like DACA and TPS.

I believe in the power of being an *ally with privilege*. This privilege I carry with me as a person, student, and researcher requires me to constantly reflect on my positionality throughout each phase of the research process (Roegman 2018). As a white non-immigrant scholar, I must recognize my power, my privilege, and how my identities may contribute to the oppression of

minority groups. Specifically, "(w)hite people must therefore be vigilant about how white racism and white privilege can be reproduced even in the act of recognizing privilege as privilege, even when one thinks one is doing 'good'" (Applebaum 2013:24). Reflections of my positionality must also account for additional social locations, such as age, class, gender, and marital status (Bilgen, Nasir, and Schöneberg 2021). Beyond this, I am transparent about my positionality with my participants (Bourke 2014). By being forthright about who I am (a white female native scholar with higher education) and the purposes of the research project, I remain reflexive about my role in the project. My role, as an *outsider*, and an ally, is to provide a space for the voices of young adults living in legal liminality to be heard.

OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION

In addition to the Introduction and the Conclusion, this dissertation is comprised of three stand-alone substantive chapters. Together, they address a variety of aspects that inform what shapes the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 focuses on the emotional consequences of navigating the transition to adulthood in *liminal legality*. Situated within the *liminal legality* (Menjívar 2006) and transitions to adulthood frameworks, this chapter advances our understanding of how the precarity of DACA shapes perceptions of control, and subsequently, influences their emotional well-being. Using both surveys and semi-structured interviews, findings offer a deeper look into both *how* and *why* young adults' perceptions of control shape their emotional well-being. Findings reveal that young adults with DACA experience mixed feelings of control, attributing their lack of control to their precarious legal status. While some young adults shared how feeling out of

control over their lives left them grappling with a host of negative emotions, others focused on the parts of their lives within their control. For the latter, engaging in cognitive emotion work helped them reframe their situation and focus on the positive. Moreover, for some, the day-to-day routine of college–like studying, going to class, and being on campus—helped them regain some control over their lives.

Chapter 3

Building from the findings discussed in Chapter 2, where I uncover how living in liminality takes an emotional toll on DACA recipients, in Chapter 3 I further explore their emotional well-being, with a particular focus on health care seeking behaviors. Situated within the *liminal legality* (Menjívar 2006) and transition to adulthood frameworks, this chapter draws on the lived experiences of 51 undocumented young adults with DACA living in Florida. While nearly all participants experienced pressing mental health needs, few sought formal mental health care services. Thematic analysis revealed that young adults confronted both cultural (e.g., mental health stigma, religious and spiritual beliefs) and structural barriers (e.g., lack of health insurance, high cost of services) to seeking mental health services. Moreover, in some cases, young adults experienced a number of both structural and cultural factors that jointly prevented them from seeking care. While these findings advance our understanding of the health care seeking behaviors of undocumented young adults with DACA, this chapter makes a novel contribution by revealing the role of informal support networks in shaping young adults' decisions to seek formal care. Specifically, informal support networks – especially parents and college staff – help young adults with DACA overcome barriers to care. Moreover, and importantly, the mothers' reactions to the mental health needs of their children significantly

influence their decision to seek care – as their mothers' approval can soften, and disapproval can magnify, existing barriers to seeking formal mental health care services.

Chapter 4

Where Chapter 3 explores the barriers to formal mental health care services, Chapter 4 unpacks *how* social belonging shapes the emotional well-being of undocumented young adults with DACA. In particular, this chapter employs both the *liminal legality* (Menjívar 2006) and transitions to adulthood frameworks to understand how (1) young adults with DACA define and experience social belonging; and (2) the ways in which feelings of social belonging relate to their subjective well-being. Using surveys and semi-structured interviews, this study reveals that social well-being (including social belonging) is related to emotional well-being. To delve deeper into the specific role of social belonging in rTelation to emotional well-being, I analyze semi-structured interviews using reflexive thematic analysis. The resultant themes reveal that feelings of social belonging are inextricably tied to feeling part of a community. While some young adults did not feel part of any community, others developed a sense of belonging within immigrant organizations and on college campuses. Moreover, this study uncovers the pivotal role of liminal legality in shaping feelings of social belonging and the emotional well-being of young adults on the margins of legality.

Chapter 5

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I discuss chapter findings, contributions for scholarship and theory, and directions for future research. In addition, and most relevant to the lives of young adults with DACA, I discuss policy implications and the potentially devastating consequences of punitive policies on the emotional health of young adults with DACA who navigate an increasingly xenophobic, racist, and restrictive national and state context.

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Chapter 2:

"The Privilege of Dreaming Towards a Future is Such a Citizen Thing": Feelings of Control among Young Adults with DACA

Contemporary forms of immigration governance increasingly blur the lines between citizens and noncitizens through the proliferation of semi-legal statuses around the world today (Cook-Martin 2019). Temporary migrant programs function as a tool of governmental control over immigrants and have produced particularly detrimental forms of inequality worldwide (Barbero 2019; Coutin et al. 2017). While there exist many forms of liminal statuses, with different criteria and benefits, all are time-limited and none offer a pathway to citizenship. Some examples of inequalities via temporary legal status include the lack of access to food, unsafe housing conditions, and exploitative working environments for refugees (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017), systemic inequalities inherent to temporary labor migration programs (Akbar 2022), and the poor health of temporary visa holders who face limited job opportunities and exploitative working conditions (Ziersch et al. 2021).

In the United States, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), one form of liminal status, "worthy" undocumented young adults with several benefits (e.g., social security number, work permit, deferral of deportation), yet denies them full societal inclusion. A favorite tool of immigration governance, DACA intentionally keeps young adults suspended in a state of liminality. As the work of Barbero (2019) highlights:

> … through DACA, the state is both able to externalize migrant 'illegality' as a reality that

> exists outside of its practices and their entanglements with the global demand for flexible and mobile labour, and simultaneously consolidate the very conditions of 'illegality' it presumably sought to ameliorate (12).

DACA, then, creates a "double bind" as the program offers limited rights and protections yet falls short of offering young adults a real sense of security (Benuto et al. 2018; Roth 2019). In addition, liminal statuses, like DACA, impose long periods of waiting and steal the time of recipients throughout their lives (García, Diaz-Strong, and Rodriguez 2022). While it is clear that liminal statuses, like DACA, limit the control – in a legal sense – recipients have over their lives, it is less understood how feelings of control are related to their emotional well-being. Furthermore, few studies (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales et al. 2018; Moreno et al. 2021; Roth 2019) have explored the various ways in which young adults interpret and leverage perceived control as they grapple with the precarity of their status.

Emerging from the field of Psychology, the locus of control construct has been widely used to examine perceptions of control regarding life outcomes and experiences. Several studies have found that individuals who feel in control of life circumstances, or exhibit internal control, experience more positive life experiences than those who attribute life outcomes to external forces (Karaman et al. 2019; Kesavayuth, Poyago-Theotoky, and Zikos 2020; Lee and McKinnish 2019). However, a growing body of scholarship has questioned the assumption that perceived control is a fixed trait by accounting for the impact of traumatic life events, that while outside of individual control, shape both feelings of control and life outcomes (Alat et al. 2021; Tremolada et al. 2020). Specifically, scholars have found that life-altering events shape how individuals perceive control in uncontrollable circumstances, like having (or caring for someone with) an illness or disability (Chung et al. 2007; Green 2004, 2011). Despite these contributions to the locus of control literature, no study to date has examined how *legal status*, a tool of

immigration governance, is associated with feelings of control and emotional well-being. Moreover, it remains unknown how the temporal precarity and legal insecurity of DACA, key features of the program, shape perceived control among young adults who arrived to the U.S. as children without immigrant documentation.

Thus, the current study contributes to both migrant adaptation and locus of control scholarship by advancing our understanding of how the precarity of DACA is related to perceptions of control, and subsequently, contributes to the emotional well-being of young adults living on the margins of legality. Drawing from Cecilia Menjívar's (2006) concept of *liminal legality* and the transitions to adulthood framework, this study employs an embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell and Clark 2017) to examine the nature of the relationship between young adults' perceptions of control and their emotional well-being. Specifically, the concept of *liminal legality* provides a framework to better understand how liminal statuses, like DACA, function as a tool of immigration governance to maintain control over immigrant populations. Through this lens, the temporal precarity of DACA is not an unfortunate consequence but an intentional step towards keeping young adults in a constant state of uncertainty. Overall, this study reveals that young adults with DACA experience mixed feelings of control, attributing their lack of control to their precarious legal status. While the quantitative models support the association between perceived constraints (feeling out of control) and negative emotional well-being, some young adults shared how they leveraged their limited control to remain positive despite their uncertain futures. In particular, college offered a space for some young adults to regain a sense of control over their lives – through the day-to-day tasks of being a student (e.g., studying, going to class, applying for programs). With the imminent threat of losing DACA, some participants gained strength from being in college, while others feared that losing DACA

would jeopardize their ability to attend college. To better contextualize the bounded control young adults with DACA have over their lives, the following section provides an overview of – and ongoing debates within – the locus of control body of scholarship.

BACKGROUND

Locus of Control

First introduced by Rotter (1954, 1966), *locus of control* has been widely applied to understand how perceived control relates to life outcomes and overall well-being. Conceptually, locus of control has been used to categorize people as either having internal *or* external control. For individuals with internal control, life outcomes are perceived to be a result of personal actions, whereas individuals with external control attribute life outcomes to external forces outside of their control (Keenan and McBain 1979; Spector 1982). The majority of studies suggest that individuals with high levels of internal control have more positive life experiences, including less academic stress (Karaman et al. 2019), more marital satisfaction (Lee and McKinnish 2019), and better overall well-being (Kesavayuth et al. 2020). For example, Kesavayuth and colleagues (2020) found that individuals who feel in control of their health, exhibiting internal control, experience better health outcomes than individuals who exhibit external control. Findings revealed that having internal control was related with both engaging in healthier behaviors (e.g., not smoking) and leading active lives (e.g., physical activity). Conversely, studies have found that individuals who attribute their health and well-being to external factors, like chance and powerful others, are less academically successful (Bahcekapili and Karaman 2020), have less marital satisfaction (Lee and McKinnish 2019), and experience worse health and well-being (Guo et al. 2021). For example, the work of Guo and colleagues (2021) found that individuals who attribute life circumstances to chance, a form of external

control, experience worse overall well-being. Specifically, the authors suggest that a belief in chance, rather than personal influence over life outcomes, contributes to a relinquishment of moral responsibility and poor health outcomes.

A growing body of scholarship has moved away from the internal-external control dichotomy to account for the multidimensional nature of perceived control. Specifically, scholars have argued that internal and external control are distinct dimensions (Gore, Griffin, and McNierney 2016; Levenson 1981; Wallston and Wallston 1981; Wong and Sproule 1984), and individuals can possess varying levels of both (Wong and Sproule 1984). According to Wong and Sproule (1984), "…a combination of external control and internal control is more effective in coping with a wide spectrum of stressful situations than sole reliance on either internal or external control" (Wong and Sproule 1984:329). By examining internal and external control as separate dimensions, rather than on opposite ends of a spectrum, scholars have found that in some situations, individuals who possess both internal and external control experience better health outcomes than those who exhibit only internal control (April, Dharani, and Peters 2012; Hayward et al. 2016). Studies have also found that external control may foster positive emotional well-being (Reknes et al. 2019), while internal control may not be desirable in high stress situations (Stiglbauer 2017).

Moreover, scholars have challenged the view that locus of control is a fixed personality trait. Rather, a growing body of scholarship suggests that traumatic events and life circumstances, outside of one's control, may shape one's locus of control. Scholars have explored the ways in which life-altering events, like chronic illness (Burish et al. 1984; Bijoux Leist and Leist 2022), disability (Green 2004; Papadopoulos Montgomery, and Chronopoulou 2013), and world events (Green 2011; Alat et al. 2021) shape perceptions of control and the ways

in which feelings of control impact life outcomes and well-being. For example, the work of Green (2004) highlights the importance of having both internal and external control when caring for a child with disabilities. Specifically, findings suggest that mothers who express high levels of perceived control, without attributing any aspect of their child's health conditions to chance or powerful others, experience stress and increased subjective burden. Similarly, mothers who exhibit high levels of external control, without feeling in control of any aspect of their child's care, also experience heightened subjective burden. Therefore, Green (2004) suggests that having more balanced levels of internal and external control may help mothers better navigate the precarity of their child's health conditions and reduce subjective burden. In addition to disabilities, Alat and colleagues (2021) examined the impact of internal locus of control on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. While the study found that internal locus of control protected against negative mental health outcomes, the authors suggest that the lack of a strong association may be due to the uncontrollable conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taken together, these mixed approaches highlight the growing divide between scholars within the locus of control literature. While some scholars view locus of control as a fixed human trait, others argue that factors external to the individual shape locus of control. Moreover, a growing number of scholars purport that individuals can possess both internal and external forms of control simultaneously, viewing locus of control as a multidimensional construct. Furthermore, scholars have evaluated the relationship between perceived control and emotional well-being, including both positive and negative emotional health outcomes. The subjective nature of emotional well-being has led to the examination of various emotional health outcomes, ranging from positive emotions like happiness (April et al. 2012; Ramezani and Gholtash 2015) and life satisfaction (Hamarta et al. 2013; Karaman, Nelson, and Vela 2018), to negative

emotions like anxiety and depression (Brown et al. 2017; Hovenkamp-Hermelink et al. 2019). While some studies have found that individuals with high levels of internal control experience better emotional health (Buddelmeyer and Powdthavee 2016; Kesavayuth, Poyago-Theotoky, and Zikos 2020), other studies suggest that external control may protect against negative emotions (Reknes et al. 2019; Specht, Egloff, and Schmukle 2011). For example, the work of Specht and colleagues (2011) highlights the importance of external control when dealing with the loss of a spouse, as individuals may be able to "…cope more effectively with this uncontrollable event because they more easily accept their lack of control and their own helplessness" (136). Moreover, some scholars have found that when grappling with life altering circumstances, like illness and exposure to traumatic events, having balanced levels of both internal and external forms of control are more desirable for emotional well-being (Green 2004, 2011; Wielenga-Boiten, Heijenbrok-Kal, and Ribbers 2015).

While scholars have begun to uncover the complex nature of perceived control – and how locus of control relates to life outcomes and well-being – studies have yet to explore the role of legal status in shaping feelings of control. To date, it is unknown if – and to what extent – legal status shapes locus of control among immigrant populations, especially for those without U.S. documentation. The following section highlights how DACA, one form of temporary legal status, keeps immigrant young adults stuck in a state of liminality as they confront the perceptions of control they have over their lives.

Living "In Between" Statuses: Feelings of Control among DACA Recipients

Legal status, a life circumstance often outside of individual control, shapes the life outcomes and well-being of individuals brought to the U.S. as children without documentation. For many young adults with DACA, their journeys to the United States often occur during early

childhood. This migration decision, largely outside of their own control, shapes subsequent life outcomes as they grow up in the United States. As young adults, DACA affords them several temporary rights and protections, like deferral of deportation, a work permit, and a social security number. However, the liminal nature of DACA does not facilitate permanent integration into society (Hamilton, Patler, and Savinar 2021). Additionally, these temporary rights and protections do not extend to their families, contributing to fears of deportation for undocumented family members (Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017) and increased family responsibilities (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021).

Unlike their documented peers, "coming of age" for undocumented young adults presents barriers to gaining adult status, including limited educational (Ábrego 2006) and employment (Gonzales 2011) opportunities. Even for recipients of DACA, the benefits of receiving temporary rights and protection from deportation are often overshadowed by the precarity of their status (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales et al. 2018; Roth 2019). Prior studies have found that living in liminality intensifies a host of negative emotions, like fear, uncertainty, and hopelessness (Del Real 2019; Gonzales 2011; Gonzales et al. 2018; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). These feelings of uncertainty and negative emotions were amplified after the 2016 presidential elections, where recipients were confronted with the imminent threat of losing their ability to legally reside in the United States. With their legal status in the hands of powerful others, DACA recipients expressed heightened negative emotions like depression and anxiety (Moreno et al. 2021) and fears of deportation (Mallet - García and García-Bedolla 2019; Nienhusser and Oshio 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Liminal statuses have become a favorite tool of immigration governance worldwide today (Barbero 2019; Coutin et al. 2017). Without a pathway to citizenship, immigrants with time-limited rights and temporary reprieve from deportation exist "in-between" statuses, or what Cecilia Menjivar (2006) refers to as *liminal legality*. Situated within a broader pattern of liminal statuses, Deferred Action is a tool of immigration governance that intentionally positions young adults in *liminal legality*. Therefore, the current study employs the *liminal legality* framework to better understand how legal status, outside of individual control, shapes perceptions of control, and subsequent emotional health outcomes among young adults with DACA.

Drawing from prior scholarship on liminality (Turner 1967), Menjívar (2006) offers the concept of *liminal legality* to frame the experiences of Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants with temporary permanent status (TPS). Specifically, "'liminal legality' is characterized by its ambiguity, as it is neither an undocumented status nor a documented one, but may have characteristics of both" (Menjívar 2006:1008). Moreover, *liminal legality* is not perceived as a legal status in and of itself, but rather a precarious space that anyone without citizenship can find themselves in as immigration laws and policies are constantly in flux (Menjívar 2006). In the case of TPS, the benefits afforded to immigrants including deferral of deportation and work permits, are limited and temporary (Menjívar 2006, 2008).

In the United States scholars have argued that recipients of DACA, one form of liminal status, live in a state of *liminal legality* (Cebulko 2014; Roth 2019). Not fully citizens or undocumented, DACA recipients navigate the "grey area" between documented and undocumented status. Since its inception in 2012, the DACA program continues to remain vulnerable to changes in presidential administrations. As exemplified by the anti-immigrant

actions of the former Trump administration, the futures of DACA recipients reside in the hands of powerful others. Even with the 2020 Supreme Court ruling to reinstate DACA, current legal proceedings make visible the ongoing threat to DACA, and to the lives of more than half a million young adults currently living in legal liminality.

In addition, this study draws from the transitions to adulthood framework. As a "normative" standard, applied to the circumstances of white middle-class young adults, becoming an adult is not a single event, but rather occurs over a series of events. Commonly referred to as the *Big Five*, these life events include completing college, securing employment, moving out of the family home, entering into marriage, and becoming a parent (Arnett 2014; Settersten, Ottusch, and Schneider 2015). Specifically, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is viewed as a time when individuals rely less on their parents' support and begin to make decisions on their own (Arnett 1998). However, young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds do not follow this "normative" pathway. Rather, it has been found that transitions to adulthood are dependent on a variety of social locations, like social class (Lareau 2011; Lareau and Weininger 2008), race and ethnicity (Arnett 2003; Lei and South 2016), and immigrant status (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021; Diaz-Strong 2022).

For young adults without permanent legal status, "coming of age" presents more restrictions than opportunities (Castañeda 2019), oftentimes limiting educational (Ábrego 2006) and career (Ábrego and Gonzales 2010) options. Even for young adults with DACA, the transition to adulthood, or transition to illegality, contributes to a host of negative emotions (Gonzales 2011; Gonzales et al. 2018; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). Combined, these frameworks advance our understanding of the impact of liminal legality at a pivotal transition period in the developmental life-course of DACA recipients. Specifically, the current

study leverages these frameworks to illustrate how the external constraints imposed by DACA (e.g., no pathway to citizenship, temporary status), outside of individual control, shape both feelings of control and emotional well-being among DACA recipients during the transition to adulthood.

RESEARCH AIMS

The current study aims to expand our understanding of how locus of control relates to the emotional well-being of young adults living on the margins of legality in the United States. First, this study employs quantitative data to examine the relationship between perceived control and the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA. Second, qualitative data are leveraged to provide a deeper understanding of how legal status, a life circumstance outside of one's control, shapes perceptions of control among DACA recipients living in Florida. Moreover, qualitative analysis offers insight into the ways in which perceived control shapes the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA as they navigate transitions to adulthood.

DATA AND METHODS

This study draws from the Immigrant Youth Project, an NSF funded[7] mixed methods project that aimed to explore the experiences and well-being of young adults without permanent legal status living in the United States. Between 2017 and 2021, surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults who had either DACA, TPS, or were undocumented. It is important to note that the research project was conducted at a pivotal point in the lives of undocumented young adults living in the continental U.S., as DACA had been rescinded and the future of the program was unknown. Therefore, to address the aims of the current study, the sample was restricted only to young adults with DACA.

[7] "Ontological Security in Uncertain Times: Legal Status and the Social and Emotional Well-Being of Undocumented Young Adults." (No.1729396).

Specifically, between 2019 and 2020, the online survey was completed by 55 young adults who arrived in the United States before the age of 16 and currently had DACA. In addition, between 2017 and 2021, 51 young adults with DACA living in Florida shared their stories during semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted between 2-to-3 hours in length and were conducted in-person and online[8]. Several steps were taken to protect the confidentiality of participants and adhere to the university's institutional review board (IRB). Specifically, verbal consent was required of all participants, identifiable information was replaced with pseudonyms, and data was kept in a single, secure virtual location that was accessible only to researchers on the project.

While the majority of the 106 participants were born in Latin American countries[9], one young adult was born in the Philippines while another was born in Poland. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish. Both surveys and interviews included questions that addressed young adults' sociodemographic characteristics, family background, life goals, migration journey, and relationships (for example). Pertinent to the current study, both surveys and interviews included Likert-scale type questions that aimed to measure feelings of control and emotional well-being. All participants were compensated with a $25 gift card to thank them for their time.

The current study employed an embedded mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Clark 2017), where the qualitative data was used to help elucidate the quantitative findings. Initially, quantitative data was used to conduct a series of regression models to examine if, and to what extent, feelings of control were related to emotional well-being. While these regression models

[8] Interviews conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic were conducted online via the Zoom platform.
[9] While the majority of participants were born in Mexico (68.9%), young adults came from 11 other Latin American countries including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Peru.

provided a useful first step, quantitative methods remain silent about *how* and *why* feelings of control shape the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA as they transition to adulthood. Therefore, interview data was also used to illustrate how young adults with DACA experience feelings of control as they grapple with the precarity of their legal status.

Quantitative Measures

Dependent variable: emotional well-being. The 6-item negative affect scale (Mroczek and Kolarz 1998) was used to examine self-reported emotional well-being. Participants were asked how often during the past 30 days they felt: "so sad nothing could cheer you up?", "nervous?", "restless or fidgety?", "hopeless?", "that everything was an effort?", and "worthless?". Response options were ranked on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = all of the time – 5 = none of the time). Similar to prior research that employs this emotional well-being scale, Cronbach's Alpha of .85 shows strong internal consistency (Mroczek and Kolarz 1998 [.87]). Higher values on the scale indicated better emotional well-being.

Primary independent variables: locus of control. To examine the relationship between feelings of control and the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA, the 12- item MIDUS sense of control scale was employed (Lachman and Weaver 1998). Factor analyses supported a 2-factor solution where 4 items loaded onto the personal mastery dimension and 6 items loaded onto the perceived constraints dimension. Specifically, the personal mastery dimension was comprised of the following four items: "I can do just about anything I really set my mind to", "When I really want to do something, I usually find a way to succeed at it", Whether or not I am able to get what I want is in my own hands", and "What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me". All four items had loadings (> .3) on a single factor, between .53 and .69. Similar to prior research that employs this personal mastery scale, the Cronbach's

Alpha of .75 shows strong internal consistency (Lachman and Weaver 1998 [.70]). Response options were ranked on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 7 = strongly disagree), were reverse coded, and summed so that higher values indicated more personal mastery, or feelings of being in control.

In addition, the perceived constraints dimension was comprised of the following six items: "There is little I can do to change the important things in my life", "I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life", "Other people determine most of what I can and cannot do", "What happens in my life is often beyond my control", "There are many things that interfere with what I want to do", and "I sometimes feel like I am being pushed around in my life". All six items had loadings (> .3) on a single factor, between .46 and .86. Two items, "I have little control over the things that happen to me" and "There is really no way I can solve the problems I have" cross-loaded on both factors and were excluded. Similar to prior research, the Cronbach's Alpha of .80 shows strong internal consistency (Lachman and Weaver 1998 [.86]). Response options were ranked on the same 7-point Likert scale, were reverse coded, and summed so that higher scores reflected more feelings of perceived constraints, or feelings of being out of control.[10]

Sociodemographic characteristics. Several individual and family demographic characteristics were included as control variables. Specifically, *gender*, where 1 = female and 0 = male, was included to address the potential differences in emotional well-being between young adult women and men with DACA (Patler and Pirtle 2018). *Age* was included to acknowledge the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA at different points in their transition to

[10] A series of factor analyses (available upon request) were conducted to assess the 2-factor structure proposed by prior research (Lachman and Weaver 1998). Both oblique and orthogonal rotations indicated a 2-factor solution that were then included in regression analyses (available upon request). Considering the multi-dimensional nature of the locus of control construct, where having high levels of internal control does not preclude high levels of external control, the orthogonal rotated factor solution was selected for final analyses.

adulthood (Hamilton, Patler, and Langer 2021; Patler and Pirtle 2018). Furthermore, two measures of education were controlled for: *highest level of education completed* (1 = grade school or less; 2 = high school; 3 = some college; 4 = college graduate; 5 = postgraduate) and *parents' highest level of education completed* (1 = at least one parent has a college education; 0 = neither parent has a college education). In addition, both *marital status* (1 = married; 0 = not married) and *children* (1 = has children; 0 = does not have children) were included as they are two common milestones during the transition to adulthood (Arnett 2014).[11] Finally, *years in the U.S.* was included as a measure of acculturation (Giuntella and Lonsky 2022) to examine the potential relationship between length of residence in the United States and the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA.

Quantitative Analysis

First, descriptive statistics were conducted to provide insight into the average scores of emotional well-being and feelings of control, as well as background characteristics among the young adult sample. Next, a series of four regression analyses were conducted.[12] The first two ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models included personal mastery and perceived constraints as correlates, respectively, to determine their independent association with emotional well-being. The third model included both personal mastery and perceived constraints as correlates of emotional well-being. Building from the third model, the fourth model controlled for several sociodemographic characteristics. Based on the nature of missing data, listwise

[11] Due to the lack of variability in both marital status and children, these measures did not contribute to the explained variance of the model and, therefore, were not included in regression analyses.
[12] Prior to conducting OLS regression analyses, all eight assumptions were tested and met.

deletion was employed for all models.[13] All regression analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 28.

Qualitative Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013). Once the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated to English (as necessary), I then reviewed the interview transcripts, created codes, and identified patterns in the data. Throughout the research process, I engaged in constant reflection of the privileged identities I bring with me as a researcher (Roegman 2018). As a white, highly educated, middle-class, female, with U.S. citizenship, I not only acknowledged my positionality but also worked to minimize bias as I analyzed the stories of young adults living on the margins of legality.

Using the qualitative software program MAXQDA Plus 2020, a two-phase coding process occurred. First, open coding was conducted to broadly identify emotional well-being and feelings of control related to legal status. Next, specific codes were created to identify emotions participants felt when sharing feelings about their liminal status and perceived control over their lives. These specific codes were then grouped together to reflect positive emotions, including feeling *powerful*, *courageous*, and *happy*, and negative emotions, including feeling *fear*, *stress*, and *anger.*

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample of 106 young adults with DACA. Specifically, sum scores on the emotional well-being scale ranged from 6 to 29, with the average

[13] Since missing data was attributed to a variety of reasons (questions not asked, response not provided or don't know), listwise deletion was employed. Additional regression analyses (available upon request) conducted with pairwise deletion and mean replacement techniques did not reveal substantial differences in findings.

score of 19.58. For the personal mastery scale, or feelings of being in control, sum scores ranged from 8 to 28, with the average score of 22.69. Furthermore, sum score of the perceived constraints scale ranged from 7 to 41, with the average score of 24.44. Therefore, at this preliminary stage, it appears that, on average, this sample of young adults with DACA expressed more feelings of being out of control than being in control. For the sociodemographic characteristics, nearly two-thirds of participants self-identified as female (64.3%) and the average age of young adults in this sample was about 23 years old (M = 23.24, SD = 3.42). On average, young adults had been in the U.S. for nearly 18 years (M = 17.26, SD = 2.88) and 51% had at least some college experience. Few young adults in this sample were married (6.1%) and/or had children (5.1%). Lastly, less than a quarter of young adults reported that either parent had a college education (23.7%). Bivariate correlations are also presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 1 and Table 2 here.]

Regression Models

Based on Table 3 Model 1, more feelings of personal mastery, or feelings of being in control, was significantly associated with better emotional well-being (b = .399, p < .001). Approximately, 12% of the variance in emotional well-being was explained by young adults' personal mastery, or feelings of being in control. Conversely, Table 3 Model 2 shows that more feelings of perceived constraints, or feelings of being out of control, was associated with worse emotional well-being among young adults with DACA (b = -.365, p < .001). This finding indicates that one-third (34%) of the variance in emotional well-being was explained by young adults' perceived constraints, or their feelings of being out of control of their life circumstances.

When both personal mastery and perceived constraints were included in the same model (see Table 3 Model 3), the protective effect of personal mastery disappeared, while the

association between perceived constraints and worse emotional well-being persisted (b = -.327, p < .001). By including both measures of control, the explained variance remained largely unchanged. Lastly, Table 3 Model 4 includes several sociodemographic measures. The findings revealed that both perceived constraints and highest level of education completed were significantly related to worse emotional well-being (b = -.365, p < .001 and b = -1.474, p = .010, respectively). Furthermore, personal mastery, gender, age, years in the U.S., and parents' highest level of education completed were not significantly associated with the emotional well-being among this sample of young adults with DACA.[14]

[Insert Table 3 here.]

These quantitative findings underscore the importance of both locus of control and educational attainment when examining the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA. The first finding, that having more personal mastery was associated with better emotional well-being, is consistent with prior scholarship on the locus of control – emotional well-being relationship (Buddelmeyer and Powdthavee 2016; Kesavayuth, Poyago-Theotoky, and Zikos 2020). Similarly, the second finding, that having more perceived constraints was associated with worse emotional well-being, is also supported by a large body of locus of control scholarship (Guo et al. 2021; Pu, Hou, and Ma 2017). However, the protective effect of personal mastery disappeared once perceived constraints were accounted for. This finding may highlight the overwhelming burden of living in liminal legality, especially during times of political uncertainty. As an executive order, the DACA program is in constant risk of termination, as

[14] Additional regression analyses (available upon request) were conducted to assess the potential interactive relationship between personal mastery and perceived constraints on emotional well-being. This interaction term was not significant in any regression model.

demonstrated by its rescission during the Trump administration (Johnson 2018; Pierce and Selee 2017). Recent studies have shown that feelings of uncertainty and negative emotions were amplified during the 2016 election and Trump administration, as DACA recipients grappled with the precarity of their legal status (Mallet-García and García-Bedolla 2021; Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021; Siemons et al. 2017).

In addition to perceived constraints, educational attainment was significantly associated with worse emotional well-being. The third finding, that having a higher degree of educational attainment was related to worse emotional well-being, supports the "double bind", which suggests that while DACA may improve access to higher education, the benefits stop short of addressing the barriers to accessing and navigating college (Nienhusser and Oshio 2020; Roth 2019). For example, prior studies have found that DACA recipients still confront barriers to accessing college, including being ineligible to receive federal aid (Carranco et al. 2022; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk 2014), having limited funding opportunities (Benuto et al. 2018), and, depending on the state, having to pay out of state tuition fees (Roth 2019). Furthermore, the anti-immigrant agenda of the former Trump administration amplified feelings of uncertainty among college students with DACA, as they planned for their futures after graduation (Alulema 2019; Morales Hernandez and Enriquez 2021).

To examine the extent in which these explanations are reflected in the stories shared by DACA recipients, I turn to the qualitative data next.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Qualitative data are leveraged to gain a deeper insight into *how* participants describe the control they have, or don't have, over their lives. Moreover, interviews are employed to illustrate *how* perceptions of control shape the emotional well-being of young adults as they transition to

adulthood without permanent legal status. While many participants felt that they could control some aspects of their lives, their precarious legal status prevented them from feeling fully in control. As the interviews were conducted at the height of the Trump administration and during the recission of DACA, participants often focused on the looming threat of losing DACA and the life they had built in the United States.

Analysis of the interviews strongly suggest that legal status is at the root of locus of control among young adults with DACA. Their stories illustrate mixed feelings of control as they grapple with the restrictions imposed on their life by their liminal status. For some participants, having limited control over their futures evoked a host of negative emotions including fear, stress, and anger. Others focused on the aspects of their life in their control which fostered positive emotions like feeling powerful and happy. Common to many stories shared was the value placed on higher education, not just for obtaining a degree, but also for being able to regain some control over their life and their imagined futures. While DACA is not directly related to college access, having DACA helped participants feel confident while navigating the college process and opened doors for scholarships. For some, feeling in control of their education, regardless of the future of DACA, helped foster positive emotions. Others felt that losing DACA jeopardized their ability to attend, or finish, college, leaving them grappling with a host of negative emotions.

In the following analysis, three main themes are presented to illustrate how legal status shapes feelings of control among participants. While the first theme demonstrates how the precarity of DACA contributes to mixed feelings of control, the latter two themes reveal the varied ways in which feelings of control shape their emotional well-being. Moreover, two

subthemes are included to offer a more nuanced understanding of *how* and *why* pursuing a college degree fosters both positive and negative emotions among DACA recipients.

"We Have Some Control on Certain Things, But Then Other Things It's Out of Our Reach".

Consistent with prior research, young adults in this study expressed mixed feelings of control as they confronted the liminality of their status (Benuto et al. 2018; Roth 2019). For example, Jason, a 21-year-old male who migrated from Mexico at 8 years old, shared that while DACA provided him with some control over his life, like more access to school and work, the temporary nature of his legal status contributed to feeling that his future was largely outside of his control:

> I feel like sometimes I don't have as much control over my life. I mean I do have control over my life, but being able to work or be here at least legally. Sometimes I'm like, I doubt that. I don't know, it could be – I try to think like, "Oh that would never happen." But then I'm like I mean we all think things could never happen but they end up happening. So there's always that – in the back of my head I'll be feeling like is this– would I accomplish things? Would I be able to do these things?

Jason, like others, felt that DACA provided him with a sense of security as he was able to live and work legally in the United States. However, the recent threat of DACA ending left him feeling hopeless when thinking about his future. Jason worried about things he thought "would never happen" but now may actually happen, like not being able to accomplish his goals if he lost DACA. Jason's words illustrate the "double bind", as DACA provides recipients with increased access to education and employment yet is unable to offer long term security (Roth 2019). Despite having a supportive job and going to college, Jason reflects on the control that the government has over his life. He shares, "We're walking on shells every single day because we can't do anything bad or else they'll take our permission to be here, to work here, and to go to school here". For Jason, living in liminality meant living with the constant fear that one mistake could cost him the life he had built in the United States.

These feelings of limited control are also reflected in Ariadna's story, a 27-year-old female who migrated from Argentina at 7 years old. She shared, "We have some control on certain things, but then other things it's like [we] did our best but it's out of our reach". While DACA provides young adults with the ability to legally live, work, and go to school in the United States, the impermanence of the program leaves recipients at risk of losing their liminal status (Burciaga and Malone 2021; Gonzales et al. 2018). Ariadna's words reveal the liminal space DACA recipients occupy, as there are just some things that remain out of her reach. She continued to explain, "I do have some control over that, but it's like, when I file I wasn't in control of it, immigration service is or if I'm applying to the program, I'm in control of it, because I'm applying and doing all these application, but then it's up to whoever doesn't like accept me". When sharing feelings of control over her DACA status, Ariadna felt that while the decision to apply was in her control, *when* she had to apply and *if* she would receive the DACA renewal was outside of her control. Like Ariadna, Martha, felt that her immigration status was out of her control. Martha, a 20-year-old female who migrated from Argentina as an infant explained, "I feel like there is, as in like, with my immigration status, like there isn't much to do about it. But for the most part, I have, I have what I need for my important things in life". Martha shared that while she felt in control of some important parts of her life, she had little control over the most important part, her ability to stay in the United States.

While participants expressed mixed feelings of control, some offered specific examples of how their legal status hindered their ability to make future plans. For Edwin, a 22-year-old male from Mexico who migrated at 2 years old, the thought of having a family of his own one day was exciting, yet feelings of excitement were quickly overshadowed when he thought about the limitations of his temporary legal status. He explained, "The only thing that causes me not to

think about that [having a family] is the legal status thing". Edwin's words reveal that legal status is at the root of his lack of perceived control. For Edwin, the precarity of DACA prevented him from thinking about having a family someday.

Moreover, fears of the future have been found to heighten negative emotions, like stress, especially when considering their limited employment possibilities (Enriquez, Hernandez, and Ro 2018). For Edwin, growing up undocumented (without citizenship) has blocked his access to certain jobs:

> I have DACA, you know, it helps with jobs and stuff. I can't do... people say, do something with your life that you're happy with, but there's a restriction. When I was little, I wanted to be an FBI agent or something like that, but I hear you have to be a U.S. citizen for that, and the way that things are going, that's kind of barricaded right now. So, it's just things like that. What job can I do that can help me in the future? Things that are barricades that I have to get through or find a way around or stuff like that. That's my legal status, that's why I always think about it. That's what blocks that.

While DACA provides some rights and protections from deportation, the temporary nature of the program leaves young adults with little control over their own futures (Patler et al. 2021). Even with a work permit, recipients are ineligible for jobs that require U.S. citizenship. As illustrated above, Edwin described how he was unable to become an FBI agent, his childhood dream job, since he did not have citizenship. It can be argued, then, that legal status was seen as the barricade to feeling in control of his future.

While Edwin shared how his legal status was the barrier to fulfilling his future goals of having a family and securing employment, Carla focused on what was in her control. Carla, a 20-year-old female who migrated from Argentina at the age of 4, shared, "I can't control my status. I can control how I feel about my status and I can control how much I let my status control me but I can't control that I'm undocumented and how that's seen by society". Carla strived to regain control of her life by deciding how much she allowed her legal status to control her. While she

recognized that her legal status and the ways her status is perceived by society remained outside of her control, she actively tried to not let her legal status affect her. Instead, she leveraged her precarious legal standing in society to make a difference in the lives of other undocumented individuals. Carla described her dedication to school, activism for undocumented students, and involvement in university wide trainings on raising awareness of undocumented populations. It is argued that by focusing on what was in her control, Carla used her liminal status to support others in similarly precarious situations.

Without a pathway to citizenship, DACA recipients are left grappling with mixed feelings of control as they transition to adulthood. While afforded the right to legally live, work, and go to school in the U.S., their semi-permanent status leaves them in a space of liminal legality (Menjívar 2006). As illustrated above, young adults with DACA described their legal status as the barrier to feeling in control of their lives. For some participants, lacking personal control contributed to an array of negative emotions as they confronted the liminality of their status. The following theme illustrates *how* lacking personal control fostered negative emotions among this sample of DACA recipients.

"I Felt Like Extremely Angry about Things That Were – I Could Control or I Can't Control It".

Consistent with the quantitative findings, some participants shared that their lack of personal control over their lives contributed to negative emotions. For example, Rosa, a 19-year-old female who migrated from Mexico at 3 years old, was angered over her liminal status. At the time of the interview, Rosa had hopes of obtaining an associate degree, yet felt that her temporary legal status may prevent her from fulfilling that dream. She explained:

> I'm really set to going back to school, so I know that I just can't sign up and I'll be accepted and I'll be able to pay it off myself. So that attributes to anger for being that person I am, I guess. For not being born here, for not having the chance other people have. So I get angry about—Like I always put myself to see other peoples' lives, and

> they're born here, and they chose to do the wrong things, and that just makes me angry, because you have the opportunity and you have your choice, and you choose the wrong one.

Despite growing up in the United States, young adults with DACA confront the limitations of their legal status when planning for life after high school. The semi-permanent nature of DACA precludes recipients from enjoying the same opportunities and rights as their citizen peers. Prior research finds that feeling excluded from traditional life milestones contributes to a host of negative emotions among young adults without permanent legal status (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, and Dedios-Sanguineti 2013; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). As illustrated above, Rosa internalized her legal status and blamed herself for not being able to pursue her dream of going to college. Moreover, she felt angry at people who were born in the U.S. for not taking advantage of the opportunities they have. She continued, "Some people are not as lucky as they [citizens] are". Rosa felt unlucky for being born outside of the United States, as her precarious position in society prevented her from feeling in control of her life.

Like Rosa, Andrea, a 30-year-old female who migrated from Honduras at 11 years old, grew up in the United States and dreamt of attending college. It was not until high school when she realized her future would be different and more difficult than her citizen peers. She shared, "Life after high school was go to school, move out, you know, things that we see normalized here. But we couldn't do that. We couldn't do any of that". For undocumented young adults, the actual transition to adulthood differed from how they envisioned their futures to be. Despite growing up alongside their citizen peers, DACA recipients confronted the limitations of their legal status as they sought employment and applied to colleges (Ábrego and Gonzales 2010). After watching her brother confront challenges when applying for college, Andrea realized she would not be able to lead a "normal" life after high school. The uncertainty of what life would

look like after high school left her living in a constant state of fear, a fear that "controls your [her] life in all aspects". Andrea's words illustrate the powerful hold legal status has over the lives of young adults with DACA. For Andrea, her precarious legal status left her feeling fearful of the future, a fear that then controlled her entire life.

For many participants, the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the 2016 elections and 2017 recission of DACA made them confront the limited control they really had over their lives. As the fate of DACA, and the lives they built in the U.S., hung in political limbo, young adults experienced heightened feelings of uncertainty and negative emotions (Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021; Siemons et al. 2017). When asked to share her feelings about the 2016 elections, Jailene, a 27-year-old female who migrated from Mexico at the age of 4, explained, "All the stuff that's happening with immigration law and this, the election, the recent election of the midterms and all of that. That's a lot of what I felt out of, you know, like extremely angry about things that were – I could control or I can't control it". The 2016 elections and the former Trump administration instilled feelings of social exclusion among young adults who already experienced legal marginalization (Mallet-Garcia and Garcia-Bedolla 2021). For Jailene, like others, the 2016 elections forced her to confront the limitations of her legal status. She felt angry that she had no say in the immigration policies that directly affected her life.

Similarly, Ricardo, a 27-year-old male from Mexico who migrated at 5 years old, felt stressed when thinking about the limited control he has over his DACA status. He explained:

> Well, like this like DACA. Obviously, I can't control anything about it. I can try to help educate people to call into the representatives. But there's very little to what could do as far as that. And because that is one of the biggest stresses of my life right now, it seems like there are events, personally out of your control.

Unlike the security afforded to citizens, DACA recipients live "in between" statuses, a precarious position that forces them to confront the lack of control they have over their lives.

While Ricardo could inform others about the importance of calling into representatives, he felt there was little more he could do about the outcome of DACA. Ricardo experienced heightened feelings of stress over the inability to control what happens to his legal status.

Like Ricardo, Lupe, a 22-year-old male who migrated from Mexico at 5 years old, shared how feelings of lacking control over his future left him grappling with negative emotions. Thinking about a future without DACA made him feel depressed:

> If they do end DACA, we can't work, and our income stops right there, and that affects the school stuff and then social life, like, just trying to persevere through the pain of having someone who doesn't want you here in the office and being in control of your life. Sometimes you just don't want to do anything, you just want to stay home. Your friends be like "Oh, let's go eat" and sometimes I'll be like "ehh". I push myself to go just so I can keep myself distracted.

For Lupe, losing DACA would mean losing the life he had built in the U.S. While he tried to "persevere through the pain", he felt powerless as the future of DACA was out of his hands. As illustrated above, his emotional health deteriorated to the point where he did not want to leave his home. Even on the occasion when he left his home, he would only go out to distract himself from thoughts about a life without DACA.

As an exception, Veronica a 20-year-old female from the Dominican Republic who arrived in the U.S. at 8 years old, pushed aside worries over what was outside of her control, namely her legal status. When asked to share her feelings about the rescission of DACA, she explained:

> Yeah. Because you can't control it. And it's like, you still have this timeframe. So just take it easy during that timeframe. And then because like, what if you stress about it during this period? And then it like, everything turns out fine and you stress for nothing, and that affects your health, your efficiency, like however you you're thinking, so I don't want to at least not now. I don't want to think about that that much.

Veronica pushed negative thoughts of losing DACA aside to focus on the present. She felt that stressing over the termination of DACA, an outcome that may never materialize, would only

negatively affect her health and efficiency. Similarly, Oleyna felt happy despite not being in control of her life. She shared:

> I'm always feeling happy. I think honestly, I forgot the meaning of happy, like what is actually happy, because I feel like I'm always happy. But in control, I don't think ever. Even though I've controlled my life, I've never been able to like – like yes, I've got this, I'm in control. I just feel like everything always led to me being like oh okay, everything's in control, it's fine.

When asked about a time she felt happy and in control of her life, Oleyna shared how she felt happy all the time, yet never like she was fully in control of her life. For Oleyna, appearing to be happy helped curb any feelings of pity for her precarious legal position in the U.S. Unlike the happy façade she showed to the world, Oleyna "always had to hide my [her] emotions". She often felt like everyone expected her to be happy, leading her to repress her negative feelings. She actively worked to push negative emotions aside, over what was out of her control, and focus on the positive aspects of her life. She shared, "I'm fine, I'm healthy, I'm living – you know, like I should be happy that I'm not like other people – sometimes people don't even have a home".

With some exceptions, these narratives illustrate *how* lacking personal control contributes to negative emotional well-being. Notably, participants attributed lack of personal control to their temporary legal status. Without the security afforded to their citizen peers, young adults felt that their future was largely outside of their control. For many participants, losing DACA meant losing the ability to pursue their goals, namely their desire to obtain a college degree. The following subtheme illustrates that for many young adults in this study, the risk of losing their ability to go to college contributes to a host of negative emotions.

"I feel like I should take a lot of classes, but then, it costs a lot, so– it grows, this, like, stress". While the quantitative findings suggest that young adults with more education report worse emotional well-being, the following narratives illustrate *how* and *why* education shapes

emotions among participants. Prior research finds that undocumented young adults confront barriers to inclusion when navigating college, including financial and social barriers, that contribute to worsening emotional well-being (Bjorklund 2018). These narratives offer us further insight into *how* lacking personal control negatively affects the emotional well-being of DACA recipients, namely through the risk of losing their ability to attend college. For example, Alicia, a 21-year-old female from Mexico who has lived in the U.S. since she was 7 years old, was a senior in college when DACA was rescinded. Thinking about what she would lose if she lost DACA, Alicia shared:

> I got really scared, like, I got sad, and I started feeling hopeless. I was also pressured, like, I felt like there was, like, a time clock thing, because my DACA will expire, like, you know, soon and everything, and I was thinking, 'Well, now, I have until this year to finish whatever I have to do, like, getting the degree and everything.' I feel like I should take a lot of classes, but then, it costs a lot, so– it grows, this, like, stress.

Alicia felt pressured to finish her degree quickly before her DACA expires. However, she could not afford to take a lot of classes which left her feeling stressed. Alicia, like others, felt that losing DACA would mean losing her ability to finish college. Like Alicia, Norma, a 29-year-old female from Mexico who arrived in the U.S. at 6 years old, thought to herself, "Maybe I should go full time to school so I can finish my degree because what if I lose DACA and I lose like the tuition"? Norma worried that losing DACA would make it difficult for her to afford school. As a result, she decided to go to college full time the previous semester. However, at the time of the interview, she explained how costs prohibited her from taking courses during the current semester. Aligned with prior studies, being able to afford college emerged as a primary concern among participants (Terriquez 2015; Nienhusser and Oshio 2020). Financial concerns were pushed to the forefront when DACA was rescinded, as participants lacked the financial ability to finish their degrees quickly.

Similar to Alicia and Norma, Damian also felt pressured to finish his degree quickly before his DACA expired. Damian, a 23-year-old male from Mexico who arrived in the U.S. at 8 years old, explained, “So you have two years. If you don’t get it [your expectations] done in those two years, you don’t know what’s going to happen”. Damian felt as if he was racing against a clock to achieve his goals, one of which was obtaining his college degree. He continued:

> If you have a degree that’s, you know, just sitting on one class, that’s great, but if you have a degree that’s taking up, you know, more than 120 hours, and you’re worried. Because you don’t know how you’re going to get, A, get that money, B, have that time, or C, if they will let you renew your DACA status.

For Damian, the temporary nature of DACA left him feeling worried that he may not be able to afford classes or even finish his degree if DACA ends. For others, like Elias, not knowing if, and when, DACA will end increased the pressure to finish college quickly. Elias, a 26-year-old-male from Mexico who migrated to the U.S. as a baby, explained that he would rather know exactly when DACA will end so he could plan ahead. He shared, “Like knowing, ‘Oh, I’ve got to do this before it ends. Oh, I’ve got to finish this. I’ve got to finish school.’ If I want to get into nursing, I’ve got to finish it before they end this”. Living with this uncertainty made it difficult for Elias to make a plan for a future without DACA.

Other participants shared how their legal status, and recission of DACA, made them reconsider if college was even an option for them. For example, Mauricio shared how his college plans were dependent on DACA, yet the future of DACA remained outside of his control. At the time of the interview, Mauricio, a 21-year-old male from Mexico who arrived in the U.S. at 6 years old, was a high school graduate with dreams of attending college. However, the recission of DACA made him question his future plans. He shared:

> My goal is to go to college or university, but what happens if they take out DACA and I'm stuck in a big loan? I can't qualify for a whole bunch of help. What happens if I'm stuck with a loan and the law is after me and I've still got to go to school? So, basically, I'm like DACA is like my parachute right now that is holding me into this whole country.

For Mauricio, the thought of losing DACA made him question his ability to afford college. As illustrated above, DACA was his safety net, allowing him to live in the United States. The possibility of returning to a fully undocumented status left Mauricio questioning his plans for college. Similarly, Serenia, an 18-year-old female who migrated from Mexico as a baby, felt hopeless when thinking about her future after high school. She shared:

> I'm scared that DACA, that's something that I'm worried about, that DACA won't be around and I won't have that security of having that documentation for me to be able to pursue my degree.

At the time of the interview, Serenia was a high school senior who dreamt of becoming an orthodontist. Having DACA provided her with the documentation to legally live and work in the United States. This documentation helped Serenia feel secure as she thought about her future college plans. However, if she lost DACA, Serenia feared she would be unable to pursue a college degree.

These narratives illustrate *why* young adults with higher education may experience worse emotional well-being. Participants share that it is not education itself, but rather the fear of losing the ability to complete their college degree that contributes to negative emotions. Moreover, these stories reveal that the very benefits of DACA, in this case increased educational opportunities, may actually heighten negative emotions as some participants may feel they have more to lose if they lose DACA. As illustrated above, some young adults expressed feelings of fear, hopelessness, and anger, when thinking about the limited control they had over their

futures. For others, focusing on the aspects of life in their control helped them to remain positive. The next section offers insight into *how* perceptions of control contributed to positive emotions.

"Personally, Emotionally, Physically, I Know I Have Full Control Over my Life".

The interviews offered insight into how some participants were able to separate the restrictions imposed by their liminal status from other aspects of their life. For example, Ron Jon, a 31-year-old male who migrated from Mexico as an infant, shared how his mother instilled in him the belief that he was in control of his future, "So she [his mother] just said, 'You just have to push yourself. People may want to bring you down or want to bring you up, but that's how it is,' but I mean, it sounds kind of selfish, you help yourself to bring yourself up or bring yourself down". To manage his emotions, Ron Jon engages in cognitive emotion work, where the goal is "… to change images, ideas, or thoughts in the service of changing the feelings associated with them" (Hochschild 1979:562). Ron Jon was able to protect himself from experiencing negative emotions through cognitive interpretations of his situation, where he was in control of his future.

Feelings of being in control were reflected in other stories, like Emir, a 26-year-old male from Mexico who migrated to the U.S. at age 5, "I definitely think I possess control over myself, over my actions. I definitely – as I said, I found I don't get angered too fast, that I lose sight of things, so – and I know that when that happens, that causes more problems". Emir described that he felt in control of his actions and over his life. Rather than getting upset over what he can't control, which would lead to more problems, he focused on remaining strong. Moreover, Emir shared that while political threats to ending DACA have "sucked", he did not let it affect his well-being, so he can stay "strong emotionally". Like Ron Jon, Emir engaged in cognitive emotion work to manage his well-being by refusing to let the recission of DACA affect him.

Emir, like others, invested their emotional energy into the aspects of life within their control. From the moment Jason received DACA, he felt empowered to stand up for his rights and the rights of others living in liminality. He shared, "It [DACA] gave me the courage to be like, 'This is wrong and I can speak about it and I can speak out against it.' Just because I came here illegally might put me at a different disadvantage from people but like I'm still the same, still equal to everybody else". Even when DACA was rescinded, Jason felt powerful:

> I might not be able to, in a law perspective, be able to not be in control of my life. But personally, emotionally, physically, I know I have full control over my life. And I can make whatever decisions for myself. So honestly, right now I feel powerful. Even though that's been threatened in a way but I still feel powerful in a way.

Jason shared that while he was unable to control his legal status, he felt in control of the personal, emotional, and physical aspects of his life. Jason engaged in cognitive emotion work by distinguishing between the one aspect of life outside of his control, namely legal status, and the rest of his life. By investing his emotions in the parts of life within his control, Jason felt powerful and in control. Moreover, DACA inspired him to become involved in immigrant activism as he strived to "make the world a better place".

Like Jason, Cesar, a 25-year-old male from Mexico, who has lived in the U.S. since he was 5 years old, described how having DACA empowered him. He expressed, "I mean, yeah, things are difficult, and somethings are overwhelming, but I never like the feeling of like, 'I can't do it,' occur. I just will always have to do something about it". Cesar, like others, engages in emotion work to mitigate negative emotions and remain focused on preparing for the future. He continued:

> Now you just have to be ready for what is going to come your way. Usually, it's always financial. Have some sort of money for fees, application fees, or whatever kind of fee. Two, get your education. Like get my degree (right) as soon as possible. And then, three is just, be ready to react. Take some sort of action. If there's a new program, do your research before you apply and see what the conditions are go for it. If there isn't a

> new program, personally, me, I don't know what the rest of the DACA people or dreamers are going to do – but I'm not going to go anywhere. I am going to stay.

For Cesar, being "a step ahead" was key, as he shared his feelings about the potential termination of DACA. Cesar focused on the steps he could take to prepare for a future without DACA, including saving money, finishing college, and looking into new programs. He shared that in the event no new programs arise, he had no plans of leaving the U.S.

Participants remained empowered, determined, and steadfast in the pursuit of their goals, despite living in legal limbo. Reflected in Edwin's story, separating the legal side of his life from the personal side helped foster feelings of control, "I think about my family, my friends, I can control those things. I don't let my legal status get in the way of things like that". Edwin, like Jason, worked to cognitively reframe his situation by keeping his legal status distinct from the important parts of his life. This distinction helped him manage emotions and foster feelings of control over his life, especially relationships with family and friends. He continued, "I don't let it [legal status] get in the way of building a life. My life is like… enjoying it, you know".

While all young adults in this study recognize the restrictions DACA places on their lives, some were able to leverage control which allowed them to feel empowered and hopeful as they approached their uncertain futures. These narratives reveal how engaging in emotion work helps young adults suppress negative emotions by creating a distinction between their legal status and all other aspects of their life. This cognitive process allows them to feel a greater sense of control over their lives and foster positive emotions. As the next section shows, some participants find this feeling of control from higher education. For these young adults, higher education becomes a space where they can regain some control over their life, helping them to feel powerful and happy.

"It [college] makes me feel powerful, like I can control some aspects". Some participants felt that college offered them a space to regain control over their lives, despite the threat of losing their DACA status. For Jailene, attending college helped her feel powerful and in control of her life. She shared:

> It [college] makes me feel powerful or like, it makes me feel like I can control – I can't control a lot of things like I can't control, you know, the laws that pass and the things that are said about people like me but I do have control over as I've seen, I can – to a certain extent, I can control some aspects.

College provides a space for Jailene to feel in control of her life. While she is unable to control what laws pass or what others think about immigrants with DACA, she focuses on the aspects of life in her control. At the time of the interview, she had received an undergraduate degree and was interested in pursuing a career as an immigrant rights lawyer. Moving forward with her education helped her maintain a sense of control over her future plans. She explained:

> I can control how hard I study for the LSAT, I can control, you know, where I apply to. I can't control if I'll get accepted or get a good scholarship but I can control a lot of things that'll make my journey a little easier or possible, not easier, make my journey possible even if it's like hard or like takes a long time, or whatever, I have to take one class every year to be able to pay for it, like I can do it.

Jailene shared that while she may not be able to control if she gets accepted to law school or receives a scholarship, she can control how hard she studies for the LSAT and where she applies to. By focusing on what was in her control, she remained positive in her journey to becoming a lawyer.

Like Jailene, other young adults shared how college offered them a space to be in control of their day-to-day lives. Ariadna, a graduate student studying the history of immigration, was grateful for the opportunities she had to pursue her college goals. She explained, "I never thought I would get an associate's, so to say I'm about to have an associate's, a bachelor's, and a master's,

it's crazy, and it's very, very exciting". While proud of her degrees, college meant more to her than credentials. She continued:

> Somebody like, in my situation was not supposed to go to school and enjoying those moments because I wasn't supposed to be there, like I wasn't supposed to like do that, so like, every moment I take that as, like, me being in class, or me reading a book that's assigned for class, or this writing assignment or this undergrad thesis that I did, or this master thesis, that is me being in control of what I want to do, and just living the moment like being present in that moment was making me super happy.

Ariadna reflected on how she watched her brother confront challenges when applying to college because of his legal status. At the age of 11, she decided school would be the key to forging a path for herself. Ariadna shared how grateful she was to have the opportunity to attend college, since she always thought someone in her precarious legal position would not be able to go to school. Through the day-to-day tasks of being in college, from reading books to writing papers, Ariadna felt happy and in control. While the future of DACA may be uncertain, she focused on living in the present and being happy. Like Ariadna, Alicia explained how going to college helped her feel happy and in control of her life. She shared:

> I feel like sometimes when I am walking on campus, I am having a great day, and I'm, like, walking underneath the trees, and I don't have to worry about money, because I just ate something, so, like, as you were talking, that's what I imagined, like hitting that groove.

For Alicia, being physically present on campus helped her feel "like I[she] was getting things done, going somewhere". As illustrated above, walking on campus provided her with a sense of peace, casting worries of money aside. Alicia's words illustrate the importance of college in the lives of young adults with DACA, as a space where those living in liminality can regain some control over their life.

For others, college provided an opportunity to make the transition to adulthood and gain independence. Katalina, an 18-year-old female from Mexico who migrated to the U.S. as a baby,

described the moment she received a scholarship. Upon receiving the scholarship, she was filled with happiness and finally felt she was in control of her life. She shared, “One thing I am is my scholarship, because I’m leaving. I want to leave. I think that makes me happy. I think I’m in control of that; that makes me really happy” .Katalina always dreamed that one day she would move out of her family home. Upon receiving the scholarship, that dream became a reality as she was now able to live on her own and become independent.

These narratives reveal the significance of college in the lives of young adults with DACA. Beyond a credential, college offered them a greater sense of control over their lives. For some young adults, attending college allowed them to feel powerful, happy, and better able to cope with the uncertain future of DACA. For others, like Jailene and Ariadna, having completed their undergraduate degrees made them feel powerful and in control as they strived for a graduate degree.

DISCUSSION

Contributing to both migrant adaptation and locus of control scholarship, findings reveal that young adults without permanent legal status experience mixed feelings of control as they navigate transitions to adulthood in the U.S. Consistent with prior research, young adults expressed a myriad of negative emotions and uncertainty over their future as they navigate life after high school (Ábrego 2006; Gonzales 2011). Since this study took place during the former Trump administration, participants grappled with their uncertain futures as the future of DACA was threatened. Despite growing up alongside citizen peers, the transition to adulthood made young adults with DACA confront the liminality of their legal status (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales et al 2018). Aligned with prior research, young adults in this study shared how their precarious legal status limited the control they had over their lives (Benuto et al. 2018; Roth

2019). Specifically, narratives revealed that while young adults felt in control of some aspects of their lives, their legal status was seen as the barrier to feeling in control of their futures. This finding contributes to a growing body of scholarship that challenges the belief that personal control is an inherent trait, but rather that factors external to the individual shape perceptions of control (Alat et al. 2021; Burish et al. 1984; Green 2004, 2011).

Consistent with prior studies (Guo et al. 2021; Kesavayuth et al. 2020), the quantitative findings suggest that perceived constraints, or feeling out of control over one's life, is associated with worse emotional well-being. Analysis of the qualitative data reveal that while some young adults grappled with negative emotions over their lack of perceived control, others expressed positive emotions over the aspects of life within their control. For some young adults, the recission of DACA left them feeling angry and depressed as they confronted the precarity of their legal status. Others, however, actively engaged in emotion work to manage their emotions and focused on aspects of life within their control. Through this cognitive process of reframing their current precarious situations, young adults expressed feeling powerful, ready to confront their uncertain futures.[15]

Lastly, the quantitative findings indicate an association between education and emotional well-being, where young adults with higher education are more likely to report worse emotional well-being. While prior research finds that challenges associated with pursuing higher education (e.g., financial, social, legal) may worsen the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA (Carranco et al. 2022; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk 2014; Roth 2019), analysis of the qualitative data offer a more complex picture. Narratives reveal that college became a way for young adults with DACA to regain control over their lives. For some young adults in this study,

[15] These emotional responses are not mutually exclusive. Some participants expressed both positive and negative emotions when sharing about their feelings of control.

the threat of losing DACA made them fear losing their ability to attend and complete college. Others, however, engaged in cognitive emotion work which helped them manage their emotions as they confronted the present threat of losing their DACA status.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study advances our understanding of *how* and *why* feelings of control shape the emotional well-being of DACA recipients, several limitations must be addressed. First, this study took place in Florida, and can only capture the experiences of young adults with DACA living in this state. While a limitation in the sense of generalizability, Florida provides an important study location as a less welcoming environment for immigrants, compared to California, where the majority of work has been conducted (Patler and Pirtle 2018; Siemons et al. 2017). Future studies should evaluate perceptions of control among DACA recipients living in other environments with both restrictive and non-restrictive immigrant policies. Second, this study was conducted during a politically tumultuous period, where the recission of DACA amplified negative emotions and feelings of uncertainty (Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021; Siemons et al. 2017). Therefore, feelings of personal control may, at least in part, be reflective of the imminent threat they felt about losing DACA. Future studies should continue to evaluate the emotional well-being of young adults without permanent legal status within the ever-changing political context. While the current study offered one example of a time when the future of DACA was threatened, namely the DACA recission and the Trump administration, the fate of DACA continues to be unknown.

Findings from this study provide the first step in understanding how legal status, a tool of immigration governance intended to control immigrants, shapes perceptions of control. Moving forward, scholars should continue to unpack the role of legal status in shaping perceptions of

control among individuals living with other temporary statuses, like TPS and F1 student visa holders, in the United States. Moreover, as these narratives show, future studies should evaluate how, and under what circumstances, individuals without permanent legal status engage in emotion work to elicit positive emotions and feel empowered during the ever-changing political and social climates. Finally, and importantly, young adults in this study echo the voices of many others – that DACA is not enough. The short-term benefits of DACA have long been overshadowed by the legal insecurity of the program, as demonstrated through the actions of the former Trump administration, ongoing legal proceedings, and Congressional inaction. Therefore, policy efforts should be directed toward creating a pathway to citizenship for young adults living in liminality (Benuto et al. 2018; Patler and Pirtle 2018; Patler et al. 2019). Until then, the futures of over half a million young adults with DACA remain in political limbo.

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Table 1. Descriptive Sample Characteristics (N = 106)

Variable	Mean/Frequency	Range/ Percent
Dependent Variable		
Emotional Well-Being (*Missing* = 9)	19.58	(Range: 6 – 29)
Independent Variables		
Personal Mastery (*Missing* = 6)	22.69	(Range: 8 – 28)
Perceived Constraints (*Missing* = 6)	24.44	(Range: 7 – 41)
Sociodemographic Characteristics		
Female (*Missing* = 8)	63	64.30%
Age	23.24	(Range: 18 – 31)
Years in the U.S.	17.26	(Range: 11 – 31)
Highest Education Level (*Missing* = 6)	3.18	(Range: 1 – 5)
Grade School or Less	2	2.00%
High school	16	16.00%
Some college	51	51.00%
College Graduate	24	24.00%
Postgraduate	7	23.70%
At least one parent has college education (*Missing* = 9)	23	23.70%
Married (*Missing* = 7)	6	6.10%
Has Children (*Missing* = 7)	5	5.10%

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations

	Emotional Well-Being
Independent Variables	
Personal Mastery	.36 ***
Perceived Constraints	-.59 ***
Sociodemographic Characteristics	
Female	-.15
Age	.14
Years in the U.S.	.05
Highest Education Level	-.10
At least one parent has college education	-.04
Married	-.02
Has Children	.05

Note: N = 106. Pearson's correlation was calculated for all continuous measures (personal mastery, perceived constraints, age, and years in the U.S). For all nominal variables (female, at least one parent has college education, not married, and no children) point-biserial correlations were calculated. For the ordinal measure, highest education level, Spearman's rho correlation was calculated. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. OLS Regression Correlates of Emotional Well-Being

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Variable	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Independent Variables								
Personal Mastery	.40***	.11			.16	.10	.14	.10
Perceived Constraints			- .37***	.05	- .33***	.06	- .37***	.06
Sociodemographic Characteristics								
Female							- 1.13	1.01
Age							.21	.17
Years in the U.S.							- .14	.15
Highest Education Level							- 1.47*	.56
At least one parent has college education							1.27	1.16
Adjusted R^2	.12		.34		.35		.39	

Note: OLS = Ordinary Least Squares; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Chapter 3:

"Mental Health Wasn't Really a Conversation That Was Had Growing Up in My Family": Barriers to Seeking Mental Health Services among DACA Recipients

Immigrants experience trauma and stress at all phases of the migration journey (Salas, Ayón, and Gurrola 2013), which contribute to a host of negative emotions (Torres et al. 2018). Scholars have uncovered a number of traumatic experiences immigrants confront before migration, like poor social and economic conditions in their home countries (Contreras 2014), during migration, like the abuse and violence at the U.S. – Mexico border (Sabo et al. 2014), and upon arrival into the United States, as they struggle to adopt the norms and customs of the new society (Bekteshi and Kang 2020). Undocumented immigrants confront a particularly hostile political and social climate post-migration, where their lack of citizenship leaves them vulnerable to discrimination, detainment, and deportation (Ornelas, Yamanis, and Ruiz 2020).

Despite their pressing mental health needs, immigrants use health care services far less than U.S. citizens (Alegría et al. 2008; Galvan et al. 2022). The underutilization of health care services among immigrants is especially prevalent among those residing in the U.S. without documentation (Derr 2016). Prior research has offered valuable insight into the various structural barriers to care that immigrants confront –including a lack of health insurance and access to services (Hill, Rodriquez, and McDaniel 2021; Luo & Escalante, 2018), financial constraints (Hacker et al. 2015), fear of disclosing status (Sudhinaraset et al., 2017), language barriers (Saechao et al. 2012), and transportation and inaccessibility (Kaltman et al. 2014). As a social determinant of health (Castañeda et al. 2015; Hill, Rodriguez, and McDaniel 2021), immigrant

status – particularly being undocumented – is a prominent barrier to receiving health care services (Brown, Wilson, and Angel 2015; Vargas Bustamante et al. 2014). Being undocumented in the labor force not only leaves workers susceptible to exploitation and harmful working conditions, but also often excludes them from receiving health insurance or medical benefits (Madden and Qeadan 2017). Moreover, prior studies have found that the inability to receive government assistance, like public health insurance, coupled with high costs of seeking health care, may become a barrier to receiving health care services for undocumented immigrants (Hacker et al. 2015; Porteny, Ponce, and Sommers 2020).

In addition to structural barriers, scholars have drawn attention to how cultural factors prevent immigrants from receiving health care services, especially when it comes to mental health issues (Derr 2016). Cultural barriers to seeking care include mental health stigma (Byrow et al. 2020), reliance on religion and spiritual guidance (van der Boor and White 2020), mistrust of professional health providers (Rhodes et al. 2015), and cultural norms about mental health (Galvan et al. 2022). Moreover, and central to the current study, some scholars have focused on the structural, social, and cultural barriers that prevent undocumented young adults from seeking care (Cha, Enriquez, and Ro 2019; Kam et al. 2023; Raymond-Flesch et al. 2014; Sudhinaraset et al. 2022; Woofter and Sudhinaraset 2022). This small body of scholarship underscores the emotional burden of growing up in the United States without documentation, and how a variety of factors (e.g., structural, psycho-social) become barriers to seeking formal health care. For example, the work of Cha and colleagues (2019) underscores the need for scholarship to look beyond access to care and consider the various psycho-social factors that prevent undocumented young adults from seeking professional support for mental health needs.

While scholarship offers important insights into this legally and socially vulnerable population of young adults in the U.S., and factors that prevent them from seeking health services, the few studies that exist focus on a single type of barrier (for an exception, see Cha, Enriquez, and Ro 2019) and use college samples. Moreover, less is known about how – if at all – undocumented young adults are able to overcome structural and/or cultural barriers to seeking care for their mental health needs. The current study contributes to this small, but growing, body of work by asking: *What* factors prevent young adults with DACA from seeking formal care to cope with negative emotions – and *how* and to what extent are they able to overcome these barriers. Drawing on the *liminal legality* (Menjívar 2006) and transitions to adulthood theoretical frameworks, this qualitative study highlights the stories of 51 DACA recipients who experience negative emotions - like feeling sad, worthless, and hopeless - yet feel unable to reach out to a mental health provider. Young adults in this study attribute their reluctance to seeking care to a number of cultural factors, like mental health stigma, religious beliefs, and gender norms and expectations, *and* structural factors, like lack of health insurance, cost, and fear of disclosing status. Importantly, findings move beyond descriptions of barriers to care and reveal the significance of informal support networks – like family and college personnel – in helping young adults overcome barriers, particularly cultural stigma, to seeking mental health services. Moreover, this study offers novel insight into the role of parents, especially mothers, in softening or magnifying existing cultural barriers to mental health care services.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Situated within the *liminal legality* and transitions to adulthood frameworks, the current study endeavors to deepen our understanding of the health care seeking behaviors of young adults with temporary legal statuses, like DACA. The concept of *liminal legality* (Menjívar

2006) draws attention to the limitations of temporary legal statuses that leave immigrants navigating spaces "in-between" documented and undocumented legal positions in society. Originally intended to describe the precarious legal and social positions of temporary permanent status (TPS) holders in the U.S., *liminal legality* applies to other temporary migrants, like DACA holders (Cebulko 2014; Roth 2019). While DACA recipients receive temporary benefits and deferral of deportation, their ambiguous legal positions leave them vulnerable to the constantly changing immigration landscape. Specifically, post-2015 political and legal events, like the actions of the former Trump administration, 2017 DACA recission, and ongoing court proceedings contesting the programs' legitimacy, have made visible the truly fragile state of DACA – as the futures of over half a million young adults hang in political limbo.

For young adults with DACA, the burden of living in liminality is amplified during the transition to adulthood. Traditionally, the pathway to adulthood is viewed as a series of steps that young adults take as they strive to gain adult status: graduating from college, moving out of the family home, securing employment, getting married, and becoming a parent (Arnett 2014; Settersten, Ottusch, and Schneider 2015). However, this "normative pathway" was theorized for middle-class white young adults and does not reflect the experiences of immigrants (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021). Central to the current study, immigration status shapes the transition to adulthood – especially for those navigating this critical life-course period in *liminal legality*. Not fully documented nor undocumented, DACA recipients "come of age" as they transition into "*illegality*". While program recipients receive more employment and educational opportunities than their undocumented peers, their temporary benefits are overshadowed by the precarity of their status (Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021; Siemons et al. 2017). Combined, these theoretical frameworks emphasize the burden young adults with DACA carry as they

navigate the transition to adulthood in *liminal legality*. Moreover, these frameworks are leveraged to better understand the factors that may prevent young adults with DACA from seeking care for their mental health needs.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

This study emerges from a larger National Science Foundation (NSF)[16] Project which sought to explore the social and emotional well-being of undocumented young adults living in Florida. The project utilized both survey data and semi-structured interviews to delve deeper into the lived experiences of young adults, without permanent legal status (e.g., TPS, DACA, undocumented). Semi-structured interviews were conducted both online and in-person, lasting between 2 to 3 hours. Nearly all interviews were in English, while a few were conducted in Spanish. All participants provided verbal consent to participate and pseudonyms replaced all identifiable information. In addition, to abide by the university's institutional review board (IRB) and ensure that participants' information was kept confidential, only researchers were able to access data from a secure virtual location. Moreover, participants received a follow-up email or text to check if they needed any support or resources, as well as a $25 gift card to thank them for their time.

Overall, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 56 young adults without permanent legal status living in the Central Florida region. Interviews were used to highlight the various domains of life undocumented young adults navigate in the U.S. For example, questions were asked regarding their migration journey, family dynamics, romantic relationships, friendships, education, employment, and emotional well-being. Importantly, the semi-structured

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interviews were conducted during a particularly tumultuous political, social, and legal time which made visible the vulnerability of all immigrant populations. From the actions of the former Trump administration, to the 2017 DACA recission, to the COVID-19 pandemic, to the ongoing court proceedings, immigrants have faced discrimination, exclusion, and uncertainty. For undocumented young adults, with DACA, recent and ongoing governmental actions threaten the lives they had built in the U.S. To gain a deeper understanding of the mental health care seeking behaviors of young adults navigating the transition to adulthood in *liminal legality*, the current study will focus on the 51 young adults with DACA. Specifically, this study aims to capture the unique and shared factors that may prevent DACA recipients – who all share the same liminal status – from seeking formal services.

Participants

Out of the 51 DACA recipients, all arrived in the U.S. before the age of 16 and were between the ages of 18 and 32 when first interviewed. Participants migrated from Mexico (37), Argentina (3), Bolivia (2), Colombia (2), Costa Rica (2), Peru (2), Dominican Republic (1), Ecuador (1), and Honduras (1). While all young adults lived in the U.S. between 11 and 31 years, over half (28) have spent between 16 to 20 years in the U.S. In addition, this sample of DACA recipients had diverse educational backgrounds, with 13 participants having a high school education or less, 33 having some college education, 4 college graduates, and 1 enrolled in graduate school. Moreover, more than half (29) of participants were employed full-time, 13 worked part-time, and 8 were not employed[17].

[17] One participant did not disclose if they were employed full or part time.

Qualitative Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded in the qualitative software program MAXQDA Plus 2022. An inductive method of coding was undertaken to ensure that codes reflected the mental health needs and barriers to care young adults in this study experienced. First, open coding of the interviews helped identify participants who experienced mental health issues. Next, a close reading of these interviews revealed if young adults sought professional support for their mental health needs, and if not, what barrier(s) they faced that prevented them from receiving care. A main code was created – barriers to seeking care – that included a variety of barriers young adults confronted to seeking professional support for their mental health needs. Some of these barriers included: lack of health insurance, cost, mental health stigma, perceived lack of provider cultural competency, gender roles and expectations, and religion.

These sub-codes were then grouped into two main categories: structural (e.g., lacking health insurance, cost) and cultural barriers (e.g., mental health stigma, religious beliefs). Moreover, a few participants described experiencing multiple structural and cultural barriers to care – reflecting compounding barriers to seeking care despite having pressing mental health needs. The following reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2020) reveals three main patterns in the qualitative data: *structural barriers*, *cultural barriers*, and *joint influence of structural and cultural barriers*. The following analysis reveals that structural and cultural factors, independently and jointly, work to block young adults in this study from receiving formal support (e.g., counseling, medication) to help them manage and overcome negative emotions. Moreover, the importance of informal support networks – particularly mothers – in softening and, at times, magnifying existing barriers to care will be discussed.

FINDINGS

While nearly all young adults in this study experienced an array of negative emotions – like feeling nervous, hopeless, and worthless – few sought out mental health services. Analysis of the qualitative data revealed several factors that prevented participants from seeking care, despite feeling emotionally burdened. While the first theme highlights the *structural factors* that blocked some young adults from seeking care, the second theme draws out the various *cultural factors* that prevent young adults from reaching out to a mental health provider. Lastly, the third theme reveals that, for some young adults, structural *and* cultural factors jointly shape their decision to seek care for pressing mental health needs. Interwoven throughout, specific members of informal support networks– especially mothers and college personnel – are highlighted to illustrate their influence in formal health care seeking behaviors.

Structural Barriers

Consistent with prior studies, structural factors were a prominent barrier for young adults in this study to seek professional care for their mental health (Hacker et al. 2015; Hill, Rodriquez, and McDaniel 2021). For Mireya, a 27-year-old female from Mexico who migrated at age 9, her struggle with body image issues was detrimental to her mental health– leaving her to deal with a host of negative emotions on her own. At the time of the interview, Mireya had graduated from college and was working as a patient care technician. Despite being employed, the cost of seeing a psychologist and her busy schedule prevented her from reaching out:

> I thought about going to like a psychologist, I don't have the money for that and I don't have time to go because I'm so busy during the daytime. And I don't want to have like, I don't know, I just feel like, I would love to go to a psychologist and talk about all this stuff, but it costs money a lot, I can't do that.

Scholars have found that high cost and taking time off work are two main structural barriers to seeking health care services for immigrants (Derr 2016). For Mireya, like others, her desire to

meet with a psychologist was outweighed by the structural factors of cost *and* time. While structural factors prevented her from seeking formal care, she also felt unable to express her feelings with friends for fear of being judged. She shared, “I keep on trying to go and like talk to my friends and they’d be like, ‘Oh you’re okay’”. As a result, Mireya kept her feelings bottled up inside.

Like Mireya, Lupe explained how cost was one barrier to him receiving formal care for his mental health needs. Lupe, a 25-year-old male from Mexico who migrated at age 5, reflected on past thoughts of self-harm and how he had difficulty opening up to others, “I don't really talk about myself a lot, or let people in as much to where the point where I have had friends like trying to talk to me about something about myself and I'm like, ‘What are you doing like, let's change the subject’”. While Lupe, now a college graduate and working for a medical center, shared that his mental health has improved, he still sometimes struggled with depression, along with feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness. Despite receiving health insurance from his employer, Lupe had yet to seek out formal mental health support. When asked what was holding him back, he shared that “They [providers] are expensive”. In addition to cost, he explained how a lack of resources left him unsure of how to take the first steps of receiving care, “I’ve been wanting to like start looking but I never know where to start, and then I start thinking like, ‘Well, if I do know someone like how do I spark up a conversation with them naturally’”.

While health insurance was not a barrier to care for Lupe, other participants shared how not having health insurance prevented them from seeking mental health support. For example, Andrea, a 33-year-old female from Honduras who migrated at age 11, graduated from college and worked as a home health aid. At the time of the interview, she expressed being under a lot of pressure to pass a medical certification exam:

> I know that this test doesn't define me, but unfortunately, when you're in the situation and [it] kind of does, so failing it already was never a good feeling, so just a test overall, like, when I went into the program, I was like, so high on it, like, "Yeah, we did great," like, "This was amazing," and now I'm like, back into, like, "Oh, my God, am I gonna be able to do it?"

Andrea explained how having to retake the certification exam took a toll on her mental health. Despite feeling worried, hopeless, and anxious about failing the test again, she did not reach out for professional support. When asked why she didn't seek care, she shared:

> I don't have like medical insurance or anything like that, like if, thankfully knock on wood, I've always been like a pretty healthy person, so if I ever need something I was like, we've gone through like a free clinic and stuff, so I think just the fact of like having to look for all those resources, I'm like, "I'm good, let's just keep moving."

Coupled with her own reluctance to search for resources, being uninsured – a prominent structural barrier to seeking care – prevented Andrea from seeking mental health services. Therefore, both structural and individual factors deterred her from seeking care – resulting in her dealing with these negative emotions on her own.

Like Mireya, Lupe, and Andrea – Kayla felt she had to deal with negative emotions on her own. Kayla, a 22-year-old female from Mexico who migrated at age 6, was going through a major life change at the time of the interview. Kayla, a college graduate with dreams of continuing her education, carried a huge emotional burden since her DACA expired. Despite renewing her DACA status, her card never arrived:

> I was thinking that it (DACA card) was on its way. So, you feel hopeless, "What am I supposed to do now? What can I do now?" I was crying, I was like, "What can I do? What do I need to do?" They're like, "You just have file it as missing or find proof that it hasn't been delivered." And when I got off the phone I just felt horrible like I'm not going to do anything with my life. I can't do anything with my life. What am I even doing here if I can't do anything?

For Kayla, like others, DACA offered her the opportunity to pursue her educational and employment goals. Without it, Kayla felt lost and hopeless – unsure of what to do next, "I'm not

able to do anything. I can't work where I want to work or I can't do anything. I feel like my hands are tied". Despite experiencing emotional distress, Kayla felt unable to reach out for professional support. She explained what was holding her back from receiving care:

> I think it's of access. I guess there is doctors you can go to like the health care clinics, but I just really don't go. I'll just rather deal with it on my own, or with that person than start with me. No, I just don't think it's something you want to I guess express to someone because I feel like they're not going to understand. They're not in the same place as you. I feel like they wouldn't understand.

Kayla's words, reflected in prior studies, underscore the importance for providers to develop cultural competency to best serve diverse populations (Linton et al. 2019). Specifically, Kayla felt that providers wouldn't understand or be able to relate to her experience navigating the transition to adulthood with a liminal status. The pathway to adulthood for young adults with DACA, like Kayla, differs from those with citizenship. The traditional milestones to gaining adult status – like going to college and getting a job – become huge hurdles when you have a liminal status. Kayla's experience illustrates how her ability to go to college and work are directly connected to her DACA status. Losing DACA disrupted her transition to adulthood and caused her distress.

These narratives push us to consider how structural factors – including, but also beyond lacking health insurance – prevent some young adults with DACA from receiving formal care for their mental health needs. Despite meeting milestones in the transition to adulthood, like graduating from college and getting a job, some young adults felt unable to afford services. Some participants – like Mireya, Lupe, and Andrea – shared how high cost of services were one of several barriers that kept them from seeking care. Other structural factors, like lack of resources, time, and perception that providers lack cultural competency, further contributed to young adults bottling up their emotions. Moreover, these stories reveal that the fear of being

judged by others, especially friends, prevent some young adults from seeking informal forms of support as well. The next section highlights the stories of several young adults who, despite carrying a heavy emotional burden, felt that cultural stigma kept them trapped with their negative emotions.

Cultural Barriers

While some young adults attributed their inability to receive formal services to structural factors, others explained how cultural factors prevented them from seeking care. For example, Osmael, a 24-year-old male who migrated from Mexico at age 8, learned early on never to share his emotions:

> I don't really talk about my feelings, it makes me feel vulnerable, the reason why is because I grew up like that, that's how my mom and everybody was like, "Don't ever tell people your feelings because they make you look like you're weak, never tell people your goals because they'll make it theirs, and they'll make it a competition."

At the age of 8, Osmael migrated from Mexico with his sisters – taking on the role of provider and protector. Like other young adults with DACA, the temporary rights and protections became both a blessing and a burden for Osmael, as he assumed a lot of responsibilities caring for his sisters (Aranda, Vaquera and Castañeda 2021). Though he has since overcome feelings of extreme stress, he never once sought professional support. Rather, he dealt with his emotions on his own to avoid feeling "vulnerable" and appearing "weak".

Like Osmael, Julia shared how the cultural stigma of mental health kept her from seeking care. Migrating from Mexico at 3 years old, Julia spent nearly her entire life in the U.S. Now 22-years-old, Julia expressed how searching for work, falling behind in college classes, and struggling with body dysmorphia has been detrimental to her mental health. Feeling completely overwhelmed, Julia often considered self-harm:

> It's the body dysmorphia, and it has to do with like, feeling helpless not being enough, not being able to control those emotions, and letting the worst part of me get to me, I thought about it [self-harm] when I was in middle school, high school, I guess more so now since I'm with someone, it's tough trying to get what they want and what I want them to do, in addition to everything else happening in my life, work, my family, school.

Since middle school, Julia felt out of control and overwhelmed in all aspects of her life – from work, family, school, and now her romantic relationship. Feeling trapped in her emotions, Julia thought about harming herself – thoughts that never really went away. Even so, Julia found it difficult to share her emotions with others, especially with her mother. She shared, "I think it was in middle school or something, I was telling my mom how I felt depressed, and she's like, 'Are you crazy, like, well, what was your reason for being depressed, you're not working, all you do is just go to school,' like there's nothing to make me feel depressed". Instead of receiving the support she needed, Julia's emotions were invalidated and dismissed. This conversation stayed with Julia and has prevented her from confiding in her mother again. She continued, "She [mother] got her own way of seeing things, so I don't want to deal with that embarrassment and shame". In Julia's case, her mother's negative response only magnified existing cultural barriers, particularly mental health stigma, to seeking care. Julia offered insight into her mother's response, and why mental health had become so stigmatized in Hispanic communities, "I know that in my community, Hispanic, Latino, they don't understand the concept of mental health, or trying to help their child with that because how they were taught it's usually just you whip the kid, and that's how discipline's made". Julia's words emphasize the likely intergenerational transmission of mental health stigma rooted in cultural collectivism (Karamehic-Muratovic, Sichling, and Doherty 2022).

Others, however, ended up reaching out for support despite confronting cultural barriers to mental health care. For example, Marta, a 21-year-old female from Costa Rica who migrated

as a baby, reflected on a past suicide attempt and the cumulative stress that led up to that moment: “I think it was honestly a combination of like a lot of bottled up feelings, a lot of things that I hadn't really addressed or kind of talked about on top of the stress, and just honestly feeling a little lost on campus, it kind of all just added on to like one thing”. The transition to college was a particularly stressful time for Marta, as she felt “a lot of pressure to do good … and find the means to do all of that”. Moreover, the lack of financial support for college resulted in her working two jobs while taking a full course load. While Marta confided in her best friend about the negative emotions she experienced, she did not seek formal care:

> It was honestly, just mental health wasn't really a conversation that was had growing up in my family, and there's definitely that like, Latino mentality of, “You'll be all right, you're fine, you're doing good.” And even like, seeing my parents’ stress, like they would never talk about it, so growing up, I never really knew how to talk about it. And it was always definitely like, just keep it yourself like, “You'll be fine,” and there was just a lot of times where I felt guilty for feeling stressed, because I felt like other people had it worse.

Marta’s words echo the work of many scholars – that mental health stigma is a primary cultural barrier to seeking health care for immigrants (Byrow et al. 2020; Derr 2016). Marta, like others, felt unable to share mental health concerns with her parents, since her family believed mental health was a private matter and not to be discussed. The silence surrounding mental health not only stigmatized the act of seeking care but also feeling the emotions – leading Marta to internalize the stigma. As illustrated above, the “Latino mentality” of never sharing emotions left her feeling “guilty for feeling stressed”. Overcoming the cultural stigma was difficult and didn’t happen until her sophomore year of college when she began therapy. Therefore, the access to and availability of counseling services in college may help young adults, like Marta, push past cultural stigma to receive care.

Like Marta, Thalia leveraged informal support offered in college to overcome the cultural stigma of sharing emotions. For Thalia, a 25-year-old female from Mexico who migrated at age

5, losing DACA left her struggling with a lot of negative emotions. Without DACA, Thalia lost her job and failed her college classes. She shared, “It [losing DACA] was a hit for my mental health, and just I felt really hopeless, I feared just walking outside my house”. These feelings became so overwhelming that she ended up reaching out for help:

> I struggled emotionally a lot like insomnia, depression, anxiety, extremely bad, and I ended up asking for help through counselors that fall. And during that time, the scholarships that I was with did not advertise or saying about mental health yet. But I went through that, and I asked for health counselor, and they wanted to put me on medicine right away, and there’s a big stigma in our family about like, no, or there is a big stigma about mental health and going to having someone.

Losing DACA had devastating consequences on Thalia’s mental health, as she struggled with severe insomnia, depression, and anxiety. Desperate to find support, but not sure where to look, Thalia reached out to the scholarship committee who helped connect her with a health counselor. While Thalia met with the counselor, she was reluctant to take medications because of how stigmatized mental health is in her family, as, “Even the thought of it [taking the medicine] was shameful for me”. With the support of key people within the university, namely the scholarship committee, Thalia was able to overcome the cultural stigma and receive the care and treatment she needed.

While both Marta and Thalia leveraged the support they received from university personnel and resources to overcome cultural barriers to receiving care, Belinda shared how her mother’s support helped her pushed past cultural stigma that prevented her from seeking mental health services. Belinda, a 24-year-old female from Mexico who migrated at age 7, worked three jobs while in her senior year in college. While DACA provided Belinda with a work permit and increased opportunities for college, the benefits of her status meant she had to take on many responsibilities for her family (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021). In addition to the stress associated with being the main provider, Belinda reflects on the trauma she experienced both

before and during the migration journey. Despite carrying these feelings, Belinda only sought care after her mother gave permission to do so:

> The Hispanic community, we really don't focus on medical, I'd never had medical attention until I actually start working for this job they provided it, or like, mental health, like I never knew until like recently, when I guess I'm in a better place now, and after doing that, it's just like, not I'm not using the same excuse, but it makes sense from the home, from the trauma coming here, all the things I've gone through that like it makes sense like, I really thought I was dyslexic, it's just that you trauma, you forget things or I've gone to a therapist who was like a spiritual one, and they were like, I didn't tell them anything, and I really didn't believe in it, my mom did, and I just went for her.

Growing up, Belinda was never taught to seek out medical care. It was only recently when she began to consider reaching out for support. As prior studies have shown, there is often a mistrust of medical providers among immigrant communities (Rhodes et al. 2015), as well as pervasive stigma of mental health (Cha, Enriquez, and Ro 2019). To overcome these barriers, her mother's support was key – allowing her to seek formal care for her mental health.

As these stories reveal, living in liminality complicates an already challenging transition to adulthood for these young adults. Achieving traditional milestones, like getting a job and going to college, came at an emotional cost for many participants – with some directly attributing difficulties to their legal status. Others, like Belinda and Osmael, shared how increased responsibilities took a toll on their mental health. A common cultural barrier to seeking health care services, mental health stigma became the primary reason for delaying or avoiding seeing a therapist. For some young adults in this study, the stigma attached to mental health became an unmovable barrier to receiving care, whereas others overcame the stigma and received care. Specifically, informal sources of support, like parents and college personnel, helped a few participants break free from the cultural stigma that left them suffering in silence. In the next section, narratives reveal how, for some young adults, the combined influence of structural and

cultural factors make it difficult and, in some cases, impossible to take the first step to receiving formal services for mental health.

Joint Influence of Structural and Cultural Barriers

Narratives reveal that, for some participants, structural *and* cultural factors jointly influence their health care seeking behaviors. For Isa, a 26-year-old female who migrated from Bolivia at age 4, the uncertainty tied to her liminal status and "not being able to talk to someone in my same situation" made her feel lonely. When she was around 16 years old, these feelings of loneliness and uncertainty of the future led to suicide ideation. To cope with these negative emotions, Isa turned to her faith, "I know when I had those thoughts [thoughts of suicide], I had to do something positive to get closer to God. Just spiritually. I feel like that helps my parents a lot; they are really involved in church". While Isa had considered counseling, religious beliefs prevented her from seeking care. Moreover, she sought advice from her parents when dealing with thoughts of harming herself:

> I just told them [parents] I was feeling depressed and down and I didn't know what to do. They're mostly the ones who were like, "You need to get closer to God and pray. Things work out, things happen for a reason. If this is happening, it's because something later is going to come that's going to be better". So, things like that, it helped.

Scholars have found that religious beliefs are one type of cultural barrier – as immigrants rely on their faith and spirituality to help them cope with negative emotions instead of seeking services (Galvan et al. 2022; van der Boor and White 2020). As shown above, Isa relied on her parents to make the best decision for her mental health needs. While relying on her faith did help her cope with negative emotions, religion and spirituality became the barrier to seeking counseling services (Moreno, Nelson, and Cardemil 2017). Furthermore, she expressed fear of disclosing her status – a common structural barrier to seeking care. While both religion (cultural) and fear

of disclosure (structural) were barriers to seeking care – her parents' belief that mental health was a spiritual matter was pivotal in Isa's decision to not seek counseling.

Like Isa, Jason, a 24-year-old male who migrated from Mexico at age 8, attributed his lack of formal mental health service use to both structural and cultural factors. Jason, a college graduate, shared how his life changed after losing DACA. At the time of the interview, Jason was unable to work and felt nervous and stressed over his legal situation. Uncertain of "what's next", Jason felt at an emotional low yet was afraid to reach out for professional support:

> I have a few doctors, but I just wrote it out their information, I haven't actually called to actually book anything. And it's not because of financials or anything, because I have insurance, I can, like take advantage of all these, like, the benefits that I have. I don't know. I feel like deep down, I feel like I don't know, I feel like in a way there's like, I'm scared, but I know exactly what I'm scared of, I still haven't put a finger on it, and be like, "Okay, I don't want to do it because of this," I know I want to do it, but I'm still haven't done it, and I feel like that emotion is because I'm scared but I still don't know of what.

Prior research finds that lacking health insurance prevents immigrants from seeking care (Hill, Rodriquez, and McDaniel 2021; Luo & Escalante, 2018). However, for Jason, health insurance was not a barrier. Rather, there was something else holding him back. As the interview continued, he offered insight into the underlying reasons for not seeking care:

> I feel like it's a bit of culture. Mexican culture specifically because it's very rooted in *machismo*, which is very rooted in like, the alpha male, all the males are, like, "You're not supposed to talk about your emotions, cry, kind of thing, because you're the provider, the head of household to family and stuff like that"… I also feel it has to do with being undocumented coming to this country, and the undocumented mentality of like, "You don't seek help, you are just thankful for the things that the country provides for you."

For Jason, both Mexican culture and legal status prevented him from seeking mental health services. Aligned with prior studies, Jason explains how sharing emotions is highly stigmatized in Hispanic culture, especially for males (Mendoza, Masuda, and Swartout 2015; Washburn et al. 2021). In addition, he shares how being undocumented – a structural factor – contributes to a "mentality" of not asking for support. Moreover, a lack of resources to locate providers becomes

another barrier to receiving care, “It’s like, what do you even find that, resources, exactly”. Taken together, cultural stigma, gender roles, legal status, and lack of resources all block Jason from seeking out mental health services.

While both cultural and structural factors blocked Isa and Jason from seeking care, Katalina shared how her mother’s support helped her overcome a number of barriers. Katalina, a 21-year-old female who migrated from Mexico as a baby, reflected on a particularly challenging time in her transition to adulthood. Specifically, the transition from high school to college was difficult for Katalina as she moved to a new city where she did not know anyone – leaving behind her family and friends. This drastic life change took a toll on her health. She shared, “I feel like it was such a big change, and during that time, my mental health and my physical health both affected each other so bad, that I just that semester, like I personally failed almost all my classes, and it was just a bad semester”. While she received care for her physical health, she had not initially sought care for her mental health.

Like Isa, Katalina grew up in a family that was “very profound in Christianity”. Katalina learned early on not to seek formal care for her mental health but rather seek support through religion. In addition, Katalina shared how not having health insurance and the high cost of care made it impossible to seek care on her own. It was only when “It [her feelings] just got bad, where I had to personally see my mother and kind of talk to her about the feelings I was experiencing, and she [mother] said it was okay to find a therapist”. For Katalina, her mother’s approval for seeking therapy, as well as financial support, made it possible for her to overcome both structural (cost of services) and cultural (religion) barriers to seeking care. While Katalina’s mother offered her critical emotional and financial support, Carla’s strained relationship with her mother was detrimental to her mental health. Now 20-years-old, Carla, a female who migrated

from Argentina at age 4, reflected on the immense emotional strain she experienced in high school:

> Back then my mom was always my biggest bully. We had a very torn relationship. She was the first one to tell me I needed to lose weight. She was the first one to tell me that … I wasn't good enough … all these things and in high school it took this huge toll on me because now from that I've developed a lot of self-esteem issues.

The tumultuous relationship with her mother took a huge toll on Carla's mental health, leading her to engage in self-harm. She shares, "So in high school, I used to cut myself. And I still have the scars even though it was years and years ago. In high school my suicidal ideation was ridiculous. In high school, I was hospitalized". Keeping her feelings bottled up, Carla's emotions became so overwhelming that self-harming behaviors quickly escalated from cutting to suicidal ideation, and finally, attempting to take her own life. She shares her mother's reaction to her suicide attempt:

> When I was hospitalized the first time for my suicide attempt. And I don't want to talk about this too long. My mom was like "How am I gonna have grandkids now if you kill yourself?" So it's like, they [parents] were not very supportive. The medication I needed they weren't supportive about. So I had to be my own ally, really in that space.

During the interview, Carla became emotional when thinking about her parents' – especially her mother's – lack of concern over her well-being, the professional care she needed, and medication she had to take. Lack of parental support compounded with the mental health stigma in Hispanic culture and cost of care – made it difficult to reach out for help. Through informal networks of support and mental health resources in college, Carla was able to overcome a number of barriers, as well as her mother's lack of support, that prevented her from receiving services.

Navigating the transition to adulthood without citizenship leaves young adults with DACA in a legally and socially vulnerable position. These stories reveal the cost of living "in-

between" statuses, as some young adults in this study exist in a perpetual state of fear and uncertainty. While Isa grappled with feelings of uncertainty and loneliness because of her liminal status, Jason confronted a life without DACA. Moreover, both Katalina and Carla soon realized how different their pathways to adulthood would be from their citizen peers (Ábrego 2006; Gonzales 2011; Shi et al. 2018). Struggling with a host of negative emotions – like chronic sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness – young adults often confided in their parents. Common across themes, family approval or disapproval of mental health services was a deciding factor in whether or not many young adults in this study sought care. In the case of Katalina, receiving her mother's emotional and financial support helped her to afford care (structural barrier) and overcome the strong religious beliefs in her family that stigmatized seeking mental health support (cultural barrier). Others, however, were left to grapple with their negative emotions alone – as their family downplayed and dismissed their emotions. Moreover, the support Carla received from informal networks in college helped her overcome barriers to care, as well as her own mother's disapproval of mental health services.

DISCUSSION

Liminal legal statuses, like DACA, complicate the transition to adulthood for young adults – as key milestones like getting a job, going to college, and moving out of the family home are all linked to legal status. The stress and uncertainty of navigating this critical point in their life course with DACA, and in some cases after losing DACA, contributes to a host of negative emotions – like feeling nervous, hopeless, and worthless. While nearly all young adults in this study expressed pressing mental health issues, few sought formal care. Several factors prevented these young adults with DACA from seeking care. Specifically, and aligned with prior studies, participants confronted structural constraints – like lack of health insurance, cost, and

perceived lack of providers' cultural competency – to seeking care (Derr 2016; Hacker et al. 2015; Hill, Rodriquez, and McDaniel 2021). In addition, cultural factors – like mental health stigma, religious and spiritual beliefs, and gender norms and expectations – were prominent barriers to seeking mental health services (Byrow et al. 2020; Galvan et al. 2022; van der Boor and White 2020). Moreover, some explained how structural *and* cultural factors compounded on one another to prevent them from seeking professional support (Cha, Enriquez, and Ro 2019).

While these findings advance our understanding of barriers to care for undocumented young adults (Cha, Enriquez, and Ro 2019; Kam et al. 2023; Raymond-Flesch et al. 2014; Sudhinaraset et al. 2022; Woofter and Sudhinaraset 2022), this study also offers novel insight into the key role of informal support networks in their health care seeking behaviors. Young adults often confided in their parents when experiencing negative emotions and placed great value on their responses. Specifically, receiving support and approval from their mothers helped some young adults overcome the cultural stigma of mental health and reach out for care. For others, their mothers' disapproval for seeking support, and at times harsh responses, only magnified existing barriers to care. Therefore, whether their mothers were supportive oftentimes became the deciding factor in seeking formal mental health services.

This finding makes an important contribution to the transition to adulthood framework, as young adults with DACA often remain "…enmeshed in their families" (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021:2127, see also Castañeda 2019). Rather than gaining independence from their family, young adults with DACA instead make decisions with their family. Even while immigrant young adults adopt adult status in some ways (e.g., working, contributing financially to the household), they defer to their families when experiencing mental health issues. In addition, DACA recipients in this study often remain at home during their transition to

adulthood, further reinforcing the strong influence of family in their health care decisions. Therefore, it can be argued that, for DACA recipients, their liminal legality intersects with the liminal nature of their transition to adulthood. By meeting some milestones (e.g., going to college, getting a job) but not fully making the transition to adulthood (e.g., living at home), the health care seeking behaviors of DACA recipients may be strongly influenced by their parents' beliefs about mental health and formal health care.

Future research should continue to unpack the ways in which parental support may mediate existing barriers to care for immigrant young adults, especially for those living in liminality. Moreover, it would be of great value to better understand the cultural and structural factors that shape family – especially parents' – responses to the mental health needs of young adults with DACA. While beyond the scope of the current study, scholars should explore the intergenerational transmission of mental health stigma that may shape both parental beliefs about mental health and condition how they respond to their adult children's mental health needs.

In addition to family support, receiving the support of key college personnel helps young adults with DACA overcome barriers to seeking care. The free mental health resources and support young adults received in college helped them push past the barriers that kept them struggling in silence (Kam et al. 2023). Moreover, as reflected in Carla's story, receiving support and guidance on finding therapy on campus helped her not only overcome cultural stigma but also her mother's disapproval and negative response to her mental health needs. In this way, the informal support systems on college campuses may offer critical social connections and help destigmatize mental health – support they may not receive from their own families. Scholars should continue to explore how vital informal support personnel and campus resources not only

offer an alternative to formal services, but can help young adults with liminal statuses – like DACA – overcome existing barriers to mental health care.

Stuck in *liminal legality,* young adults in this study – like all DACA recipients – navigate increasingly anti-immigrant political, legal, and social climates in the United States. The recent actions of the former Trump administration, 2017 DACA recission, and ongoing court proceedings not only threaten the futures of recipients and their families – but pose an immediate risk to the mental health of young adults navigating the transition to adulthood in liminal legality. Living in Florida, home to the 51 DACA recipients in this study, leaves young adults not only facing federal restrictions because of their status but also the conservative state context. While beyond the scope of this study, future research should explore the ways in which contextual factors related to strict state contexts, like laws, policies, and overall political climate, contribute to – and even exacerbate – mental health issues and barriers to care that young adults with DACA grapple with on a daily basis.

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Chapter 4:

"When I Started to Own my Undocumented Identity, I Was Able to Create a Community": How DACA Recipients Experience Social Belonging in Liminal Legality

For over a decade, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival's (DACA) program has provided temporary benefits and protection from deportation to approximately 800,000 undocumented young adults (Bruno 2021). Introduced in 2012 by the former Obama administration, DACA has helped select undocumented young adults integrate into society by opening doors to employment and educational opportunities (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszcyk 2014), as well as having positive impacts on their emotional well-being (Patler et al. 2019). Despite these benefits, DACA falls short of offering recipients any real sense of security. Without a pathway to citizenship, the temporary nature of DACA leaves young adults grappling with their uncertain futures (Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021; Patler et al. 2019). The limitations and precarity of the DACA program became hyper visible after 2015, as political and legal events – including the anti-immigrant agenda of the former Trump administration, 2017 DACA recission, and ongoing court proceedings – make it impossible to ignore the program's fragility.

For young adults with temporary legal statuses, like DACA, the transition to adulthood presents more obstacles than opportunities (Gonzales 2011; Valadez et al. 2021). While DACA recipients enjoy greater access to college and the workforce than their undocumented peers, their lack of citizenship presents barriers to full societal inclusion. For example, limited resources and support available in high school for undocumented students make it difficult for them to gain

capital needed to navigate the college process (Bjorklund 2018). In addition, not having the full rights and protections afforded to U.S. citizens, undocumented young adults (including those with DACA) are ineligible for federal aid and, in some states, do not qualify for Wisconsin – explicitly prohibit undocumented young adults, including those with DACA, from receiving in-state tuition waivers and state aid. In addition, college options are limited for DACA recipients who live in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina – three states which strictly ban young adults with DACA from enrolling in certain colleges (Higher Ed Immigration Portal 2023). In Florida, a tuition equity bill was passed in 2014, granting out-of-state waivers to undocumented students who had attended Florida high schools for at least three years. Though, in a recent press conference, the Florida Governor DeSantis announced the intention to end this program (American Immigration Council 2023). Beyond education, entering the workforce without citizenship leaves DACA recipients with limited job opportunities (Smith 2019).

In addition to difficulties young adults without permanent legal status face when trying to gain adult status, some also confront the added burden of navigating the transition to adulthood with multiple stigmatized identities. For example, the work of Jesus Cisneros captures the intersectional identities – and experiences of social marginalization – among those who are undocumented and queer. In addition to legal exclusion, individuals who identify as "UndocuQueer" face challenges when navigating undocumented and queer spaces (Cisneros and Gutierrez 2018). While undocumented immigrant and LGBTQ+ activism movements are often perceived as spaces of inclusion, those who hold both identities often find it difficult to fully belong to either community. As their marginalized identities are often at odds with one another, immigrants who are both undocumented and queer are faced with forging a new path to social inclusion. Cisneros (2018) finds that for participants, "(p)ublicly adopting undocuqueer as a label

challenged and reshaped the grounds for their exclusion by rejecting the fear, shame, and invisibility inherent within their gender, sexuality, and immigration status" (1429). While some have found power in resisting the exclusionary nature of both LGBTQ+ and immigrant spaces, others struggle with negative emotions as they don't feel like they belong to either group (Cisneros and Bracho 2020).

While some young adults without permanent legal status grapple with legal liminality and social marginalization, others find their community within immigrant organizations. A large body of scholarship has explored the role of immigrant organizations in fostering positive emotional well-being among undocumented young adults (Arriaga and Rodriguez 2021; Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014). For instance, young adults have shared how joining immigrant organizations helped them feel empowered (Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa Rodriguez 2017) and part of a community (Seif 2016). Community involvement provides young adults with the opportunity to develop valuable connections with others in similarly precarious situations (Siemons et al. 2017). The formation of social ties, especially with others who share similar backgrounds, has helped young adults without permanent legal status cope with negative emotions (Siemons et al. 2017; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). As one example, the "Undocumented and Unafraid" social movement provided a platform for undocumented young adults to disclose their status as they put pressure on the government to pass the DREAM Act, a bill that would provide a pathway to citizenship (Corrunker 2012; Flores 2016). This social movement helped transform immigrant young adults from powerless political pawns to empowered activists.

In addition to immigrant organizations, prior studies uncover the important role of college in offering opportunities for undocumented young adults, including those with DACA, to

find community. In particular, supportive campus environments, immigrant-led student organizations, and resource centers, help college students with DACA develop a sense of social belonging (Banh and Radovic-Fanta 2021; Cisneros and Rivarola 2020). Specifically, a number of universities have taken important steps in creating "Undocufriendly" campuses through the implementation of ally trainings and resource centers to support undocumented and DACAmented students (e.g., Cisneros et al. 2021; Delgado 2022; Hinton 2015; Sanchez and So 2015). These forms of institutional support, among others, have helped students find community in college (Santa-Ramirez 2022).

Overall, scholars have found that feelings of belonging are important for the social incorporation and subjective well-being of immigrant young adults, especially those without permanent legal status. Feeling connected to and supported by their identity communities (e.g., undocumented background, LGBTQ+, college) matters. However, how this happens and *why* this matters are less understood. The current study strives to broaden and, at the same time, deepen our understanding of the underlying mechanisms that facilitate and hinder the social belonging of DACA recipients – as well as how feelings of social belonging relate to their emotional well-being. I define "…belonging … as situational, constructed across one's lifespan, and constantly being negotiated" (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016:13). I argue that belonging is not solely tied to place and space (Huot et al. 2014; Rios, Vazquez, and Miranda 2012), *or* national identity and citizenship (Yuval-Davis 2007), *or* the attachments made with others (Baumeister and Leary 1995). For DACA recipients, it is impossible to divorce the social from the structural forces that shape their legal standing in society. By putting the social elements of belonging (e.g., attachment with others) in conversation with larger structural forces (e.g., legal liminality), we gain a richer understanding of how young adults define, experience, and leverage feelings of

social belonging to negotiate their temporary positions in society. While scholars have uncovered the positive influence of social belonging on the emotional well-being of immigrant young adults (Aranda et al. 2023; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez, 2017), more work is needed to understand how young adults living in liminal legality define and experience social belonging – and how feelings of belonging shape their subjective well-being.

Situated within the *liminal legality* (Menjívar 2006) and transitions to adulthood frameworks, this mixed-methods study complicates our understanding of the connection between social belonging and emotional well-being. Findings reveal that while young adults gain a sense of belonging in immigrant advocacy organizations and on college campuses, the emotional benefits of belonging in these contexts are not so clear-cut. In particular, involvement in immigrant advocacy often becomes a double-edged sword – contributing to conflicting emotions. In addition, while some young adults feel connected to communities which help foster a sense of belonging, others struggle to feel fully connected to any community. Moreover,, this study offers insight into how liminal legality shapes the conditions under, and the extent to which, young adults with DACA develop a sense of belonging.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

To capture the unique semi-legal positions of DACA recipients, the current study is situated within the *liminal legality* framework. Proposed by Cecilia Menjívar (2006), the concept of *liminal legality* illustrates how immigrants with restrictive and time-limited benefits are stuck "in-between" statuses. Notably, " 'liminal legality' is characterized by its ambiguity, as it is neither an undocumented status nor a documented one, but may have characteristics of both" (Menjívar 2006:1008). While *liminal legality* has been used to describe the tenuous legal positions that temporary migrants occupy, it is not a legal status. Rather, liminality is a space that all immigrants without citizenship may be thrust into as the immigration landscape is constantly

changing (Menjívar 2006). While initially applied to understand the legal situations of those with temporary permanent status (TPS) in the U.S., *liminal legality* offers a useful lens to explore the precarious legal positions of DACA holders (Cebulko 2014; Roth 2019). Despite growing up alongside their citizen peers, their limited rights and the temporal nature of their reprieve from deportation illustrate their legal exclusion. For instance, DACA recipients are ineligible for federal student aid, are unable to vote, and do not qualify for many forms of federal public assistance. Moreover, as of 2023, the program offers no pathway to citizenship and leaves more than 600,000 recipients vulnerable to losing their ability to lawfully reside in the United States.

While legal exclusion has consequences for all individuals, those who navigate the transition to adulthood in *legal liminality* confront a number of barriers to social, political, and legal inclusion. To address the particular hardships faced by DACA recipients during this pivotal life-course period, this study also draws from the transitions to adulthood framework. Traditionally, the period between adolescence and adulthood is marked as a time when young adults finish college, obtain employment, move out on their own, get married, and start a family (Arnett 2014; Settersten, Ottusch, and Schneider 2015). This "normative" standard, however, does not account for the many disadvantaged social locations young adults occupy, including race and ethnicity (Lei and South 2016), social class (Lareau 2011), and immigrant background (Aranda, Vaquera, and Castañeda 2021). For young adults without citizenship, like those with DACA, this life-course transition period presents more challenges than opportunities. While their citizen peers are taking the next step into adulthood, young adults with DACA confront the liminality of their status as they pursue college and/or search for employment. Taken together, these frameworks underscore the legal exclusions that DACA recipients confront as they navigate the transitions to adulthood. These frameworks are utilized to better understand how

young adults with DACA develop a sense of social belonging as they navigate spaces of liminal legality, and how feelings of social belonging shape their emotional well-being.

RESEARCH AIMS

This mixed-methods study strives to deepen our understanding into *how* social belonging relates to the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA in Florida. Project data, including both surveys and interviews, offer a unique opportunity to examine quantitative associations between social belonging and emotional well-being as well as gain deeper insight into how young adults define and experience social belonging while navigating spaces of legal liminality. To this aim, I propose two research questions: (1) How do young adults with DACA define and experience social belonging? and (2) In what ways do feelings of social belonging relate to their subjective well-being?

DATA AND METHODS

Data

Survey and interview data for this study comes from the Immigrant Youth Project (IYP), an NSF funded study (see Chapter 1 for description of project). Broadly, the IYP study aims to better understand the social and emotional well-being of young adults living in the United States who arrived as children without legal documentation. Specifically, the IYP study provides insight into the experiences and well-being of young adults without permanent legal status who live in Florida, an understudied state-context. Both surveys and interviews include a series of scales that assess participants' well-being, feelings of security, and perceptions of belonging[18]. The semi-structured nature of the interviews offers participants the opportunity to elaborate on their responses to the scales.

[18] This study employs data from the NSF study (No. 1729396) "Ontological Security in Uncertain Times: Legal Status and the Social and Emotional Well-Being of Undocumented Young Adults."

While 116 young adults with DACA, TPS, or who were undocumented participated in the larger project, the current study includes only those with DACA to focus on how young adults define and experience social belonging as they navigate the transition to adulthood in "liminal legality". In total, 106 young adults with DACA were included in this study. While over two-thirds (68.9%) of participants migrated from Mexico, young adults also hailed from Guatemala (2, 1.9%), Honduras (1, .9%), Ecuador (3, 2.8%), Bolivia, (3, 2.8%), Colombia (5, 4.7%), Peru (9, 8.5%), Argentina (3, 2.8%), Dominican Republic (1, .9%), Brazil (1, .9%), Chile (1, .9%), Philippines (1, .9%), Poland (1, .9%), and Costa Rica (2, 1.9%). Among the DACA participants, 55 young adults completed online surveys administered during 2019 and 2020.

Moreover, 51 young adults participated in semi-structured interviews between 2017 and 2021. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, lasted between 2 to 3 hours, and took place either in-person or online.[19] All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and carefully reviewed prior to coding. To ensure confidentiality and adhere to ethical guidelines, as set forth by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), all participants provided verbal consent prior to the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities and data were kept in a single, secure location, accessible only to the research team. About 24 hours after the interview, participants received a $25 gift card and a follow-up message to check in and see if they needed any resources or support.

Analytic Approach

An embedded mixed-methods design (Creswell and Clark 2017) was used to integrate qualitative and quantitative data to gain deeper insight into how young adults define and experience social belonging – and how social belonging relates to their emotional well-being.

[19] Some of the interviews were conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, descriptive statistics were employed to provide insight into the background characteristics, social well-being (including social belonging), and the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA from both survey and interview samples. Second, ordinary least squares regression (OLS) models were conducted to examine how social belonging relates to emotional well-being among young adults with DACA. While an important analytic tool, the regression analysis offers only a partial view of the relationship between social belonging and emotional well-being among DACA recipients. Specifically, the broad nature of the social well-being measure (which social belonging is one dimension of) is unable to capture the specific influence of belonging on subjective well-being. Therefore, interviews were used to unpack the role of social belonging in facilitating or hindering positive emotional well-being. Common across the interviews, young adults attributed their feelings of belonging to feeling part of a community. Qualitative analysis unpacks their diverse experiences of how finding a community helps them develop a sense of belonging – and the nuanced ways in which social belonging shapes their emotional well-being.

Quantitative Measures

Dependent variable. To measure *emotional well-being*, the 6-item negative affect scale was used (Mroczek and Kolarz 1998). Participants were asked how often they felt an array of negative emotions over the past 30 days: “nervous”, “restless or fidgety”, “worthless”, “like everything was an effort”, “so sad nothing could cheer you up”, and “hopeless”. Response options ranged from 1 – 5, where 1 = none of the time, 2 = a little of the time, 3 = some of the time, 4 = most of the time, and 5 = all of the time. Items were reversed coded and summed to create a scale ranging from 6 to 29, where higher values reflected better emotional well-being. Consistent with prior studies (Mroczek and Kolarz 1998 [.87]), the emotional well-being scale had strong internal consistency with a Cronbach’s Alpha of .85.

Independent variable. While no direct measure of social belonging was available, the 15-item measure of social well-being (which included social belonging) was employed (Keyes 1998). In general, "… social well-being is operationalized as an individual's perceptions of his or her integration into society, of his/her acceptance of other people, of the coherence of society and social events, of a sense of contribution, and of the potential and growth of society" (Keyes and Shapiro 2004:350). Participants were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "the world is too complex for me", "I don't feel I belong to anything I'd call a community", "people who do a favor expect nothing in return", "I have something valuable to give to the world", "the world is becoming a better place for everyone", "I feel close to other people in my community", "my daily activities do not create anything worthwhile for my community", "I cannot make sense of what's going on in the world", "society has stopped making progress", "people do not care about other people's problems", "my community is a source of comfort", "I find it easy to predict what will happen next in society", "society isn't improving for people like me", "I believe that people are kind", and "I have nothing important to contribute to society". Response options ranged from 1- 7, where 1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = a little agree, 4 = don't know, 5 = a little disagree, 6 = somewhat disagree, and 7 = strongly disagree. Items were reverse coded, as needed, and summed to create a scale ranging from 40 – 94, where higher values reflect a greater sense of social well-being. The social well-being scale had a Cronbach's Alpha of .69, that, while acceptable for internal consistency, is lower than prior studies[20] (Shapiro and Keyes 2008 [.81]).

[20] Additional item analysis tests were conducted to reveal if the removal of specific items would increase the overall internal consistency of the scale. Findings revealed only minimal improvement, and thus no items were removed (available upon request).

Sociodemographic controls. Based on prior research examining the emotional well-being of young adults with DACA, several background characteristics were included. Gender (1 = female, 0 = male) was included to measure variation in emotional well-being between young adult men and women (Patler and Pirtle 2018). In addition, age was controlled to examine if young adults' emotional well-being was related to the developmental phase of their transition to adulthood (Hamilton, Patler, and Langer 2021; Patler and Pirtle 2018). To further examine the potential relationship between traditional developmental milestones and emotional well-being, both marital status (1 = married and 0 = not married) and children (1 = has children and 0 = does not have children) were included (Arnett 2014). Participants' highest level of education completed (1 = grade school or less; 2 = high school; 3 = some college; 4 = college graduate; 5 = postgraduate) was also included as college is seen as a pivotal point in the transition to adulthood for young adults, including those without citizenship (Gonzales and Burciaga 2018). Last, a measure of acculturation was included: Years in the U.S. where higher values reflect longer time living in the U.S (Giuntella and Lonsky 2022).

Quantitative Analysis

Due to the size of the sample (N = 106), a limited number of socio-demographic controls were selected, prioritizing their significance to the model. Variable selection was determined through a series of step-wise regressions to evaluate the contribution of each covariate to the overall explained variance of emotional well-being. Robustness checks revealed that neither marital status nor having children substantially contributed to the model and were therefore excluded from analyses.[21]

[21] Information on marital status was collected for only half the sample and most were not married. Given that the other half of the sample shares similar characteristics, comparable levels of married individuals would be expected.

Prior to conducting regression analyses, descriptive statistics were calculated to show, on average, young adults' perceived levels of social and emotional well-being. Descriptive statistics offer insight into the background characteristics of young adults in this study[22]. Initially, correlations and tests of multicollinearity were conducted. While related, the variance inflation factors (VIFs) indicate the covariates are not multicollinear (VIFs = 1.037 – 1.495). To examine the relationship between social and emotional well-being, two ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were conducted.[23] The first model is a bivariate OLS regression which examines how social and emotional well-being are related, without the socio-demographic controls. The second model is a multivariate OLS regression which evaluates if the relationship between social and emotional well-being persists when controlling for socio-demographic characteristics.

Qualitative Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which young adults with DACA define and experience social belonging, and how social belonging shapes emotional well-being, reflexive thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013). Specifically, reflexive thematic analysis does not contend that themes "emerge" but that they are instead created through the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant. Recognizing the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge is critical when analyzing the lived experiences of marginalized populations (Berger 2013). Therefore, I am intentional about remaining aware and reflexive of my positionality - as a white, highly educated, U.S. citizen - at each phase of the research process. To this aim, I use my privileged positions in society to provide a platform for the voices of undocumented young adults with DACA to be heard.

[22] Robustness checks were conducted for the survey and interview data. See Appendix H for mean comparisons.
[23] All assumptions of OLS regression were met.

Qualitative data were coded using MAXQDA Plus 2022 software. Open coding was conducted to first identify instances when participants shared feelings of social belonging (or lack thereof) and how social belonging shaped their emotional well-being. Patterns in the data revealed that young adults described social belonging in the context of feeling part of a community. While some young adults struggled to connect to any community, others expressed the important role of supportive college campus communities, immigrant advocacy organizations, and church groups (among other communities) in helping them gain a sense of social belonging. In addition, a few young adults described their community as their close family and friends. The current study focuses on three main patterns in the data: *searching for community*, *finding community in immigrant organizations*, and *finding community in college*.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

As shown in Table 4, young adults in this study represent a heterogenous group of DACA recipients. While, on average, young adults reported fairly positive emotional well-being (19.58), their emotional states varied widely (6 to 29). In addition, on average, the combined sample of DACA recipients expressed feeling a slightly positive sense of social well-being (69.69) – though scores ranged between 40 to 94. The average age of DACA recipients was 23.24, with young adults ranging in age between 18 to 31. Since the conditions of DACA required young adults to arrive in the United States prior to their sixteenth birthday, the average time spent in the U.S. was 17.26 years. However, young adults in this study migrated at different points in their childhood and adolescence, where time spent living in the U.S. ranged from 12 to 31 years. The majority of young adults in this study self-identified as female (64.30%) and reported diverse educational backgrounds. While approximately half of the participants (51%) had some college education, 24% were college graduates, 16% graduated from high school, 7% had a postgraduate

degree, and 2% had a grade school education but did not graduate from high school. While many young adults in this study had at least some college education (82%), this study does not exclusively focus on college students or college educated DACA populations[24].

[Insert Table 4 and 5 here.]

Regression Models

To examine the relationship between social and emotional well-being, two ordinary least squares regression analyses were conducted. Table 6, Model 1, shows that a greater sense of social well-being was associated with better emotional well-being ($b = .195$, $p < .001$). Approximately 19% of the variance in emotional well-being was explained by feelings of social well-being. In Table 6 Model 2, both social well-being and educational attainment are significantly related to emotional well-being[25]. Findings suggest that young adults who express a greater sense of social well-being experience better emotional well-being ($b = .190$, $p < .001$), when accounting for gender, age, years in the U.S., and highest education level. In addition, young adults who have higher educational attainment report worse emotional well-being ($b = -1.622$, $p < .05$). When accounting for sociodemographic characteristics, the explained variance in emotional well-being increases to nearly 23%.

[Insert Table 6 here.]

These quantitative findings suggest that an overall greater sense of social well-being (which includes social belonging) may relate to more positive emotional well-being. Aside from social well-being, findings suggest that highly educated young adults in this study may experience worse emotional well-being than those with less education. What remains unknown,

[24] Bivariate correlations are available in Table 5.

[25] To address missing data, listwise deletion was employed. Further regression analysis (available upon request) revealed that educational attainment was insignificant when using pairwise and mean replacement approaches. The significant relationship between social and emotional well-being persisted regardless of missing data approach.

however, is how a sense of belonging is developed and experienced – and how college may factor into how young adults foster a sense of belonging. In addition, the broad scope of the social well-being measure is unable to capture the specific influence of feelings of belonging on the emotional states of young adults in this study. Therefore, qualitative analysis is employed to deepen our understanding of how young adults define and experience social belonging – and how these feelings of belonging shape their subjective well-being.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Reflexive thematic analysis centered on three main patterns identified in the qualitative data: *searching for community*, *finding community in immigrant organizations*, and *finding community in college*. The first theme illustrates how some young adults grapple with legal and social marginalization – feeling stuck "in-between" or unable to find a community. Others, however, were able to find a community in immigrant organizations as they formed social connections with others who shared similarly precarious legal positions – as shown in the second theme. Lastly, the third theme underscores the importance of college campuses – as a setting – that offer opportunities for young adults in legally precarious positions to cultivate a sense of belonging. Interwoven throughout, liminal legality helped shape how young adults experienced social belonging – and how social belonging influenced their emotional well-being. The following theme highlights the stories of several young adults who struggled to find a place to belong.

Searching for Community

Despite migrating from Mexico at age 5, Lupe a 25-year-old college graduate expressed difficulty confiding in others and struggles to find where he belongs. The youngest of four brothers, Lupe shared how family tension led him to feeling like a "black sheep" in his family. In

addition, his temporary legal status in the U.S. and lack of connection to family in Mexico left him feeling like he does not belong anywhere:

> Like, I don't feel like I belong here, because people don't want me here, but then if I go over there [where?], I don't know anything about where my family is from, I know, I have family over there, but I don't know one thing about it, and everything that I do kind of remember it feels like a flashback or like a dream, it doesn't feel like it's my memories, you know what I mean.

Despite spending nearly all of his childhood and adolescence in the U.S., Lupe feels rejected from his country of reception and disconnected from his country of origin, contributing to weak feelings of belonging to both. Moreover, the larger anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. makes it difficult for Lupe to feel connected to a society where he is unwanted.

While Lupe struggles to form a sense of social belonging to the United States or Mexico, Jason shares how navigating the transition to adulthood with multiple stigmatized identities hinders his ability to feel like he belongs to any community in the United States. Arriving in the U.S. at 8 years old from Mexico, Jason, a 24-year-old college student felt he was “always living in between”. Identifying as Mexican, American, LGBTQ+, and immigrant, Jason explained how he never felt connected to any one community:

> Sometimes I feel like I'm not Mexican enough for my Mexican community, sometimes I feel like I'm not American enough, because I wasn’t born here, and part of the LGBT community, I feel like I'm not accepted enough, because I don't look a certain way that they want me to look which is like, all about physic and looks and I've also noticed, like my immigrant community is also racist towards other minority communities which has their own community, and then same thing with the LGBT community, I feel like they're also they have their own racism towards either like the black community or the Hispanic community. So sometimes I feel like it's like, 5% here, 10% over here, 30% over here not fully like connected to one community.

Jason’s story highlights the exclusionary spaces of seemingly inclusive communities. Navigating life at the intersection of multiple stigmatized identities, like being undocumented and gay often results in feeling stuck in-between communities (Cisneros 2018; Cisneros and Bracho 2020). For Jason, the many layers to his identity – including being undocumented – makes it difficult for

him to feel like he fully belongs to any one community. Liminal legality, then, contributes to his inability to develop a sense of belonging.

Like Jason Edwin felt that society did not offer any type of meaningful community to belong to. At just 2 years old, Edwin, now a 22-year-old college student, migrated from Mexico. He described community as a "utopia", where everyone is treated equally. For Edwin, the ideal community is not be tied to any one identity – like legal status – but rather "…a little of everything… a community should be equal, everybody sees each other, there's no negative". Edwin's words speak to the broader process of "othering" in U.S. society – where people are categorized and excluded based on a variety of stigmatized social locations – one of which is legal status. In this case, feelings of belonging are not linked to interpersonal connections but rather larger structural processes (e.g., liminal legality) that distinguish between who belongs in society, and who does not.

These stories draw attention to the often-overlooked experiences of young adults who negotiate spaces of legal and social liminality. As reflected above, both Jason and Edwin share how liminal legality contributes to their inability to develop feelings of social belonging. Social liminality, for Jason, is experienced as feeling at the margins of multiple communities. Navigating the transition to adulthood with multiple stigmatized identities – including his liminal status – makes it difficult to develop a sense of social belonging. While Jason experiences social liminality – navigating spaces in-between communities – Edwin is unable to develop a sense of belonging to a community he can't see. For Edwin, the broader structural processes of othering (e.g., liminal legality) keep him feeling socially disconnected. While both Jason and Edwin partly attribute their inability to develop a sense of belonging to their liminal status, Lupe feels rejected by the U.S. – his host country – and disconnected from Mexico – his home country. For

Lupe, the larger anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. makes him feel unwanted and like he doesn't belong in the country he grew up in.

Interestingly, for these young adults, their inability to form a sense of belonging did not contribute to positive or negative emotions. This may suggest that the connection between social belonging and emotional well-being is most profound for those who do form a sense of belonging. From this perspective, it may be the case that emotional responses to social belonging are related to what communities provide and/or demand of young adults who navigate the transition to adulthood in liminal legality.. In the next theme, I explore how DACA recipients experience social belonging in immigrant organizations – and how involvement in advocacy shapes their emotional well-being.

Finding Community in Immigrant Organizations

Consistent with prior studies, young adults shared how joining immigrant organizations and activism helped them feel included, powerful, and part of a community (Seif 2016; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa Rodriguez 2017). For many, growing up undocumented meant hiding a part of themselves for fear of reactions and consequences if their legal status was revealed. By becoming part of a welcoming community, specifically immigrant organizations and activism efforts, participants shared how they finally felt able to disclose their status. For example, Emir, a 26-year-old male from Mexico who has lived in the U.S. for the past 21 years, felt unable to disclose his undocumented status growing up. It was not until he joined an immigrant organization that he was able to own his identity as a DACA recipient. He shared:

> When I was young, I didn't tell anybody that I was illegal, it was only within my family. And when I had DACA, I didn't really tell anyone that I was a DACA recipient. The only ones who knew were family and some close friends. But yeah, now, seeing what happened in DC, seeing what kind of – what the help from the … organization, that I just recently joined, kind of, like, gave me a boost in morale and, like, a base to kind of voice myself out. So, yeah, that felt powerful.

As illustrated above, Emir became involved in immigrant activism once DACA became threatened. Upon witnessing organized protests in Washington DC, where immigrants and allies spoke out against the 2017 DACA recission, Emir felt empowered to share his story. Once he joined, he felt a "boost in morale" as he formed social connections with others in similarly precarious legal situations (Siemons et al. 2017; Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017). Emir's words highlight the strong influence of legal liminality – in this case the vulnerable nature of DACA – on shaping his experience of social belonging. Specifically, the threat to his liminal status led him to join immigrant advocacy efforts – which in turn helped him feel powerful.

Like Emir, Marina, a 22-year-old female from Mexico who has lived in the U.S. for 15 years, became involved in immigrant advocacy once DACA was rescinded in 2017. Therefore, liminal legality was influential in shaping her experiences of belonging – as her decision to join the immigrant rights movement was in response to the imminent threat of losing DACA. Once she decided to join, Marina began to embrace the part of her identity she had keep hidden growing up. Moreover, she explained how her involvement at the rallies in D.C. helped her realize the change she was making in the lives of many undocumented individuals. She shared, "We don't see it right away, but us all coming out of the shadows and saying we're undocumented… Because growing up we were never able to speak of that". As exemplified by the "undocumented and unafraid" immigrant rights movement, there is power in collective action (Corrunker 2012; Flores 2016). For Marina, the shared experience of living in liminality helped her form social connections to others and feel empowered to share her own story.

Similarly, Jailene learned of her undocumented status in seventh grade – yet was unable to share her status for fear of negative reactions. Jailene, a 27-year-old female from Mexico who

has lived in the U.S. for 23 years, struggled to make connections with her peers and felt like an outsider in high school. She shares, “I couldn’t really fit in with anybody that was at my school because I didn’t wanna get close to anybody cuz if I got close to anybody, I feel like I would have to tell them about my status and I didn’t wanna have to do that”. Jailene’s words reflect the burden of growing up undocumented in the U.S., as her legal status hindered her ability to develop friendships and have positive social interactions. It was only when she became involved in immigrant activism that she felt comfortable sharing her status and story. When asked about who she trusts in, she explained:

> I definitely trust in community and the people that I've met as I've been doing the work, like the movement work that I have done in my life here. I can rely heavily on my community… whether it be immigration related or health related or whatever, I know that they would drop anything to assist me and my family.

Like Emir and Marina, Jailene’s sense of belonging was shaped by her liminal status. Specifically, she defines her community as the people she met doing “the movement work”. Forming social connections with others who shared similar backgrounds and experiences of legal liminality instilled in her a deep sense of trust. Moreover, the support she received from her community – both related to and apart from immigration related issues (e.g., health) – helped solidify social embeddedness within the community.

For some young adults in this study, involvement in immigrant activism came at an emotional cost, however. For example, Belinda a 24-year-old female from Mexico who has lived in the U.S. for 17 years, shared how the 2017 DACA recission led her to begin an immigrant organization in Florida and organize a protest in Washington D.C. Belinda expressed mixed emotions as she reflected on her involvement:

> I was afraid, and being there being so vulnerable, but feeling like everybody supported you, it was definitely like I was crying out of joy I was crying out of sadness I was crying out of vulnerability because it was so many emotions all at once, it was beautiful, it was

> scary, even putting ourselves out there because we were the only, I basically made myself a face of the organization because it affected me and I feel like people needed to know like, hey, you guys know about this but this is the way it is.

Belinda's words emphasize the double-edged sword of involvement in immigrant organizations. In response to the 2017 DACA recission, Belinda became heavily involved in the immigrants' rights movement. While her liminal legality shaped how she formed a sense of belonging – her decision to become the "face of a [immigrant] organization" came at an emotional cost. Her newfound visibility as an out and open DACA recipient left her grappling with mixed emotions – feeling joyful, sad, vulnerable, and fearful.

Similarly, Oleyna, a 21-year-old female who migrated from Mexico at age 2, shares how her liminal legality – as made visible by the threat of losing DACA - led to her involvement in immigrant activism. In response to the 2017 recission of DACA, Oleyna organized rallies and formed an immigrant organization – actions that helped her develop a sense of belonging. Even so, she quickly became overwhelmed with her growing responsibilities as a leader in the immigrant rights movement. She reflects back to the day of the first rally, "I was so overwhelmed, I was so stressed. My parents were there, they were 'You did that.' I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I did that.' But that's scary. I don't know what to do". Oleyna's words illustrate the mixed emotions that activists carry as they strive to support others in similar situations. She continued:

> I might not be able to change the world, but I can change someone's world. When I die or go somewhere, I want to be, "Okay, I helped someone at least. At least I helped someone, I changed someone's life." Just experience with my advisor in high school when they didn't know what to with me because I was undocumented, I don't want another person to go through that. I want them to be, "Well, I know this girl, she might not be a professional, but she knows what to do because she's been through that."

To minimize negative emotions, Oleyna engaged in cognitive emotion work, where the aim is "… to change images, ideas, or thoughts in the service of changing the feelings associated

with them" (Hochschild 1979:562). By focusing on the change she is making in the lives of others, especially those who also grow up undocumented, Oleyna justifies feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

While both Belinda and Oleyna remained active, Yvette began to pull away from her organization. Yvette, a 23-year-old female from Mexico who has lived in the U.S. for 13 years, was a co-founder of an immigrant organization in Florida. Like others in this study, becoming part of an organization helped Yvette feel included and comfortable disclosing her status, "… like more that unafraid part of (her) being undocumented". While the supportive community she became a part of during the D.C. rallies, in response to the programs' recission in 2017, helped to empower her, she quickly began to feel excluded in her own organization once returning home to Florida. She explained:

> I felt like I was just the person sitting there at the table. I felt like oh like, I have no input I'm just the freshman. I don't know anyone, and nobody's gonna care about my thoughts. And I said it to one of the Presidents and I was like, "I don't feel comfortable with that group. Like I feel like I'm not being heard or anything." And she just said one like she said it to the group once and then that's it. I was like, "I just don't feel like you guys are with me. Like you're saying we're family, but I don't feel the family aspect of it." And sadly, I let that get to me too far where I'm like I don't want to worry about DACA anymore.

Despite being a co-founder of a local immigrant organization, Yvette began to feel excluded from decisions and uncomfortable with other members. She shares, "I felt comfortable with strangers in D.C., but I just didn't feel comfortable with people here. They (strangers in D.C.) had that enthusiasm instead of that I need to do it like, I don't want to, but I need to". Oleyna describes a hierarchy that began to form in the organization, leading to internal conflict and a lack of communication between members. Feeling that her voice was unheard, the social connections to other members – and the organization as a whole – began to wane, which ultimately led to her leaving the group.

Overall, these stories reveal how legal liminality – made visible by aggressive policy initiatives like the 2017 DACA recission – strongly influences the decision to join immigrant organizations. Being part of an immigrant organization and advocacy helps some young adults in this study form a sense of belonging through social connections with other members in similarly precarious situations. For some, immigrant advocacy helps them build community, cope with emotional trauma, and feel empowered to share their story. Others, however, grapple with mixed emotions – feeling empowered through shared experiences and, at the same time, overwhelmed by their responsibility to others. These stories shine a light on how involvement in immigrant advocacy can become a double-edged sword – leading to conflicting emotions that carry the potential to fray social belonging.

Finding Community in College

While not all young adults in this study went to college (or even desired to), college campuses offered opportunities for some young adults to develop a sense of social belonging. Aligned with prior studies, participants described the challenges they confronted when applying to and navigating college (for a systematic review of scholarship on undocumented students in higher education, see Bjorklund 2018). Most notably, some young adults in this study struggled to afford college as they had limited access to financial support. Without citizenship, young adults with DACA are ineligible for federal aid (Carranco et al. 2022) and, in some cases, have to pay out of state tuition (Roth 2019). Common among those in college, financial insecurity and the inability to obtain resources to fund their education contributed to a host of negative emotions. Despite encountering obstacles when applying to and navigating college, some young adults in this study reflected on how they found community, often for the first time, in college. Carla, like others, discovered she was undocumented when starting college. Having lived in the

U.S. for 16 years, Carla, a 20-year-old female from Argentina, shares how, “When [she] started to own [her] undocumented identity [she] was able to create a community”. College offered a space of self-discovery, acceptance, and celebration of her identity as an undocumented individual. Moreover, she expressed how the welcoming environment at her university helped her develop critical social connections with peers and staff:

> I'm not sure entirely what it was in college. I think a little bit is like internet, social media, and just like seeing movements like that come about. Another piece of it was just like meeting other, like no other, ‘cause back then I wasn't. But people who were unapologetic about their identities (their status yeah) and it being a space where that was celebrated (yeah) I feel like it's celebrated at [university] in like pockets that I've made homes in. And then... I don't know another piece is just like conversations. When my supervisor from orientation walked me over to [university staff] and then I got connected with him and then I started working with [university training program to raise awareness of undocumented student community]. That was kind of when I started seeing that this was a community and it's not just me.

Carla’s words reveal the important role that college plays in fostering a sense of community and positive well-being among immigrant students, especially those with precarious legal statuses. She describes how meeting other students who were open about their legal status *and* seeing how immigrant students were welcomed into the university community had a significant impact on her own sense of social belonging. Moreover, the support she received from university staff and involvement with a university training program that raised awareness about undocumented students’ challenges, it helped her feel included and part of a community.

Similarly, Ariadna, a 27-year-old female from Argentina, who has lived in the U.S. for 20 years, expressed how both faculty and colleagues shaped her feelings of inclusion:

> I've always felt included, everything that like I read or my opinions always mattered, and my professors made it seem that, like what I needed to say was important, and as well, I feel it with my classmates, whenever I talk about making connections about immigration, I feel that they care about what I have to say, not just about my experience, but as well as all my knowledge on it. So I always feel included in the classroom, as well like, I feel now that I'm part of the diversity committee at the [university] department, I'm the graduate student representative.

For Ariadna, a graduate student pursuing a master's degree, her feelings of inclusion stem from the experiences within the department, rather than the university as a whole. With the support of faculty and colleagues, she felt valued and appreciated within the department community. Moreover, serving on the leadership board of the department's diversity committee provided her a platform to advocate for all minoritized students, including those navigating graduate school without citizenship. College, then, offers her a space to construct a sense of social belonging and feel that her voice matters.

Others, like Daniel and Lucian, share how campus resources for immigrant students, including organizations, helped them develop a sense of belonging in college. For example, Daniel, an undergraduate student pursuing a college degree, explains how the availability of resources for immigrant students, including on-campus organizations, helped him develop a sense of belonging. Daniel, a 22-year-old male from Peru who has lived in the U.S. for 18 years, shares, "I felt heard. I felt like I belonged because of that organization alone, with scholarship program aside". Daniel shares that having the institutional support and presence of a student organization focused on immigration helped him feel valued, seen, and welcomed into the campus community. Reflected in prior studies, creating an "undocufriendly" campus that offers resources and support for immigrant students (Tapia-Fuselier 2021) as well as ally trainings (Cisneros and Lopez 2016) helps cultivate an environment that fosters positive educational and emotional experiences.

Like Daniel, Lucian, a 24-year-old male from Peru who had lived in the U.S. for 17 years, described how he found his community in college when he co-founded a student organization focused on promoting social justice. He shared:

> It's, my community is pretty small. It's more like a circle you know. And it's basically the people that know a lot about me, about what I've been through, that I told them for

> various reasons. Maybe just ‘cause they want to know more about me and they want to, you know. They want to know why I'm doing all of this. Why I'm spending all time on this and not sleeping cause of this and working on this and... or just because they, they feel depressed and I sometimes, I know this sounds horrible sometimes people just want to hear that somebody else is having a rough time or you know, they're not the only ones so... it usually helps so... and when I talk about my depression or something else it, my status comes up just because it's... it's the reason why I was, this is all that happens so... so... that's what I consider my community.

As illustrated above, Lucian did not find belonging in an existing on-campus organization – but rather he utilized the supportive campus environment to create his own community. While others form social connections with others with shared experiences, Lucian defines his community as those who care about him, and his story, regardless of their immigrant background.

While college campuses offered a space for young adults to find – and even create – their own communities and sense of belonging, Marta draws attention to how her temporary legal status hindered her ability to feel fully included on campus. Marta, an 18-year-old female who migrated from Costa Rica as a baby, reflected on the difficulties she confronted in college because of her liminal status:

> I would say the biggest thing like I think college is definitely an eye-opening place for DACA, although [university] is an HSI and I was able to find a community, it definitely took me a minute to get there and it definitely took a lot to build that community. And I feel like a lot of people don't understand how difficult it is to be a DACA student, in terms of financial aid, and honestly just getting an answer a lot of the times big universities or corporations don't understand what DACA is and don’t understand, like the requirements and being told one answer, and then finding out that that's not the right answer, and just having to call and go through so many different offices, because no one knows the answer, it's just frustrating, honestly.

While attending a Hispanic serving institution helped her build community, the challenges she confronted in college came at an emotional cost. Aligned with recent studies, Marta’s words illustrate the obstacles young adults, without citizenship, confront when navigating the college process (Lambert 2022; Macías 2022). Between a lack of communication between offices (e.g., admissions, financial, health services) and insufficient understanding of the DACA program

amongst administrators and staff, even the most welcoming environments often lack the resources to fully support college students with precarious statuses, like DACA (Ábrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020). For Marta, the emotional burden of navigating college with DACA tends to overshadow the positive benefits of the community she has been able to build. Her liminal legality, then, complicates her feelings of social belonging in college.

These narratives reveal that for some young adults, college campuses offer opportunities to find – and create – a sense of belonging. Overall, young adults share how college offered them a space to embrace their identities and form social connections with like-minded peers – immigrants and allies alike. While some found a community within existing immigrant organizations and academic departments, others worked to create a sense of belonging by forming an organization. With few exceptions, college campuses offered an important space for young adults with DACA to cultivate a sense of social belonging amidst legal liminality.

DISCUSSION

Liminal legal statuses, like DACA, prevent young adults from fully integrating into society after high school. Traditional milestones – like going to college and getting a job – become difficult to reach as DACA recipients lack the full protections and rights of U.S. citizenship. While young adults with DACA spend their formative years in the U.S., with most arriving as children, their temporary legal status creates barriers to college and employment (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszcyk 2014). Moreover, and the focus of the current study, living in liminality makes it difficult for young adults to gain a sense of social belonging – especially for those with multiple stigmatized identities (Cisneros 2018; Cisneros and Bracho 2020). For those able to develop social belonging, scholars reveal the important role of forming social connections within immigrant organizations (Arriaga and Rodriguez 2021;

Unzueta Carrasco and Seif 2014) and supportive immigrant climate on college campuses (Banh and Radovic-Fanta 2021; Cisneros and Rivarola 2020) in helping young adults feel included.

The current study leverages both quantitative and qualitative methods to advance our understanding of how social belonging shapes emotional well-being. Aligned with prior research, the quantitative findings indicate that having a greater sense of social well-being (including social belonging) is related to better emotional well-being (Gonzales, Brant, and Roth 2020; Santa-Ramirez 2022). To unpack how young adults define and experience social belonging in liminal legality, qualitative analysis was conducted. Reflexive thematic analysis reveals that feelings of social belonging are deeply rooted in being part of a community. While some young adults feel "in-between" or without communities, others found a community when forming social connections with others in similarly precarious situations. Yet still, some formed a sense of belonging within supportive campus communities and when joining existing – or creating their own – campus organizations. For the latter, the availability of resources and informal support networks (e.g., supportive staff and peers) helped young adults foster a sense of social belonging amidst their precarious legal status (Cisneros and Lopez 2016; Tapia-Fuselier 2021). This finding adds additional layers to our understanding of the role of college in shaping emotional well-being.

This study also complicates the general view that a greater sense of social belonging foster positive emotions. While some young adults felt empowered once they formed social connections with other members of immigrant organizations, some grappled with conflicting emotions tied to their immigrant advocacy. While involvement in immigrant organizations and advocacy empowered young adults to share their story – a part of their identity they kept hidden, being responsible for others in similarly precarious situations quickly became overwhelming.

This finding highlights the – often overlooked – double-edged sword of immigration advocacy by revealing that the connection between social belonging and emotional well-being is not so clear-cut (Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez, 2017). Future studies should continue to explore the emotional benefits and consequences of being involved in immigrant advocacy, and how emotional responses to involvement may vary based on the larger political, legal, and social contexts. Since this study was conducted at the height of the former Trump administration and during the 2017 DACA recission, the findings may be at least partly due to the anti-immigrant climate and imminent threat to DACA. Therefore, scholars should exercise caution in applying these findings to studies conducted in the post-Trump era.

Moreover, these stories reveal the prominent role of liminal legality in shaping how young adults in this study experience social belonging. While not a legal status in itself, young adults with DACA come to internalize their liminal legality as they transition into adulthood. For some, their liminal positions in society hinder their ability to develop a sense of belonging, while others find community because of their liminal status. Among the latter, the post-2015 political and legal events (e.g., Trump's election, 2017 DACA recission) created a hyper awareness of the program's vulnerability and spurred some young adults to get involved in immigrant advocacy. While young adults did leverage their own personal agency to make the decision to join immigrant advocacy efforts, threats to their liminally legal status inspired them to join. However, this was not the case for all young adults in this study. A few participants felt that their liminal legal position left them "in-between" or outside of communities. In these cases, their liminal legality did not prompt them to join organizations or activism efforts, but rather made them feel ostracized by society. Therefore, both liminal legality and their own personal agency jointly shape the experiences of social belonging in the lives of DACA recipients. Specifically, these

findings reveal that while liminal legality may shape the ways in which young adults seek belonging – the decision to join the organizations and activism efforts are theirs to make. Future studies should continue to explore how liminal legality shapes social belonging over time to evaluate how specific political and legal events may amplify or minimize the extent to which liminal legality shapes social belonging – and subsequent emotional well-being.

Overall, this mixed-methods study draws attention to a critical juncture in the life-course of young adults with DACA. Specifically, the transition to adulthood is a psychosocial phase where meaningful social connections and relationships are developed (Erikson 1963). It is theorized that young adults who fail to meet this milestone may experience difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships, as well as poor health, over their life-course (Adams and Marshall 1996). For those navigating the transition to adulthood in liminal legality, the importance of developing social connections, forming relationships, and feeling socially embedded is even more important. Therefore, attention must shift from the short-term to the long-term impact of social belonging - developed during the transition to adulthood – on the quality of health and relationships of young adults with liminal statuses throughout their life-course.

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Table 4. Background Characteristics of Young Adults with DACA (N = 106)

Variable		%	Range
Dependent Variable			
Emotional Well-Being (Mean, SD)	*Missing* = 9	19.58 (5.47)	(6 - 29)
Independent Variable			
Social Well-Being (Mean, SD)	*Missing* = 23	69.69 (11.56)	(40 - 94)
Socio-Demographics			
Female	*Missing* = 8	64.30	(0 - 1)
Age (Mean, SD)		23.24 (3.42)	(18 - 31)
Years in the U.S. (Mean, SD)		17.26 (2.88)	(12 - 31)
Highest Education Level (Mean, SD)	*Missing* = 6	3.18 (.86)	(1 - 5)
Grade School or Less		2.00	
High school		16.00	
Some college		51.00	
College Graduate		24.00	
Postgraduate		7.00	

Table 5. Bivariate Correlations

	Emotional Well-Being
Independent Variables	
Social Well-Being	.446**
Socio-Demographics	
Female	-.149
Age	.135
Years in the U.S.	.143
Highest Education Level	-.102

Note. A series of correlations were conducted based on variable level of measurement. For all continuous measures (social well-being, age, years in the U.S.), Pearson's *r* correlation was calculated. For the nominal measure, female, a point-serial correlation was calculated. For the ordinal measure, highest education level, a Spearman's *rho* correlation was calculated. ** $p < .01$.

Table 6. OLS Regression: Association between Social and Emotional Well-Being

	Model 1			Model 2		
Variable	**b**	**SE**		**b**	**SE**	
Independent Variables						
Social Well-Being	.195	.044	***	.190	.045	***
Socio-Demographics						
Female				.144	1.091	
Age				.240	.189	
Years in the U.S.				.024	.223	
Highest Education Level				-1.622	.642	*
Adjusted R^2	.189			.228		

Note: * p < .05; *** p < .001.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

The transition to adulthood marks a critical time in the life-course for young adults. For those with temporary legal statuses, the pathway to adulthood presents more challenges than opportunities, as young adults confront the limitations of their liminal status. This dissertation shines a light on the lived experiences and emotional well-being of young adults protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program. One form of temporary legal status, DACA keeps young adults stuck in a state of liminal legality – provided some temporary rights and protection from deportation but deprived of full societal inclusion (Hamilton, Patler, and Savinar 2021). While the program has benefited recipients by increasing educational and employment opportunities (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszcyk 2014), as well as improving emotional well-being (Patler et al. 2019), these benefits soon became overshadowed by the precarious nature of DACA (Benuto et al. 2018; Gonzales et al. 2018; Roth 2019).

The year 2015 marked a dramatic shift in the lives of over 800,000 DACA recipients, as the truly vulnerable nature of DACA became visible. From the anti-immigrant actions of the former Trump administration, including the 2017 DACA recission, to the ongoing attacks on the DACA program, DACA recipients have been living through a politically, socially, and legally tumultuous time. Not surprisingly, navigating the transition to adulthood in increasingly hostile, anti-immigrant times has been detrimental to the emotional health of young adults without U.S. citizenship (Moreno et al. 2021; Patler et al. 2019; Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021).

021). However, even with this growing mental health crisis among a particularly vulnerable group of young adults, we know little about how they are able to manage, and overcome, these negative emotions – if at all. This dissertation project fills in this gap by asking: What factors – and how do these factors – shape the emotional well-being of DACA recipients as they make the transition into adulthood? In the following sections, I provide an overview of chapter findings and contributions to scholarship.

CHAPTER FINDINGS

To address the central question of this dissertation, each of the three data chapters offers unique, but interconnected, insight into the factors that shape the emotional well-being and coping behavior of undocumented young adults with DACA. First, in Chapter 2, I sought to understand *how* and *why* perceptions of control related to the emotional well-being of DACA recipients. Using both surveys and interviews, this chapter uncovered the role of legal status in shaping feelings of perceived control. Specifically, all DACA recipients attributed lack of perceived control over their life to their liminal status. However, even while all experienced mixed feelings of perceived control, some young adults managed to overcome their negative emotions by engaging in cognitive emotion work. Through cognitive emotion work, some young adults with DACA actively worked to distinguish the legal status from other aspects of their lives. This finding reveals one way that young adults living in liminality manage negative emotions – by leveraging their own personal agency.

Next, in Chapter 3, I sought to understand the factors that prevented DACA recipients from seeking formal mental health care services. While many young adults experienced an array of negative emotions and serious mental health issues like depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and even suicide attempts, few ever sought professional mental health services. To gain deeper

insight into the factors that may have held young adults back from receiving mental health services, I asked: *What* factors prevent young adults with DACA from seeking formal care to cope with their emotional health needs – and *how* (if at all) they are able to overcome these barriers. Qualitative analysis revealed a number of structural and cultural barriers that hindered their ability to reach out for professional support. While some young adults attributed their reluctance to seeking formal care to structural factors, like lack of health insurance and high cost of services, others felt constrained by deeply imbued cultural factors, like mental health stigma and religious beliefs. Yet still, a few described how both structural and cultural factors compounded on one another to prevent them from seeking formal support for their mental health needs. Moreover, this chapter reveals the strong influence of informal support networks in either hindering or helping young adults overcome barriers to formal services. A novel contribution to scholarship, these informal support networks – especially mothers and college staff – are pivotal in shaping the health care seeking behaviors of young adults with DACA. Oftentimes, a mother's approval becomes the deciding factor for young adults – either softening or magnifying existing barriers to formal care. Therefore, for some, informal supports like mothers and college staff provide a second way to cope with negative emotions.

Lastly, chapter 4 deepens our understanding into how undocumented young adults with DACA define and experience social belonging – and how feelings of belonging relate to their emotional well-being. Specifically, I asked: *How* do young adults with DACA define and experience social belonging – and *the ways in* which social belonging shapes their emotional well-being? First, surveys were employed to examine the potential relationship between social well-being (including social belonging) and emotional well-being. Quantitative findings revealed that social and emotional well-being are related – where a greater sense of social well-being

contributes to better emotional well-being among DACA recipients. Second, semi-structured interviews were analyzed to unpack how young adults in this study define and experience social belonging – and how their feelings of belonging shape their emotional well-being. Overall, young adults define social belonging as the communities they feel connected to. While some young adults felt unable to fully feel part of any community, others found their community within immigrant organizations and on college campuses. Novel insight is offered into how legal status shapes the conditions under, and the extent to which, they develop a sense of social belonging. Moreover, this study highlights how involvement in immigrant organizations function as a "double-edged" sword as young adults with DACA grapple with conflicting emotions.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCHOLARSHIP

As a whole, this dissertation reveals the pivotal – and often interconnected – role of structural, cultural, social, and familial factors in shaping the emotional well-being of DACA recipients, and how they cope with their liminality. First, this project situates locus of control as an aspect of emotional well-being and unpacks the influence of liminal legality in shaping perceptions of control (chapter 2). Second, findings deepen our understanding of what structural and cultural factors – and how these factors both independently and jointly – prevent young adults from seeking formal mental health care services. Moreover, this study finds that informal support networks – especially mothers and college staff – often serve as gatekeepers to receiving professional services (chapter 3). Third, and lastly, findings uncover the factors that shape social belonging and how social belonging relates to emotional well-being. Notably, liminal legality plays a pivotal role in shaping feelings of social belonging – often leading young adults to join immigrant organizations. In addition to immigrant organizations, college campuses offer opportunities for young adults with DACA to form critical social connections and leverage

resources to solidify their sense of belonging. Specifically, this study offers novel insight into the dual effects of involvement in immigrant advocacy on their subjective well-being (chapter 4). Beyond this, the dissertation reveals the ways in which young adults exhibit personal agency in forging their own pathway to adulthood – from engaging in cognitive emotion work (chapter 2), to leveraging informal social support (chapter 3), to carving out spaces of belonging amidst legal liminality (chapter 4).

Directions for Future Research

Future research should continue to unpack the role of informal support networks in the lives of young adults navigating the transition to adulthood without citizenship. While this dissertation uncovers two key forms of informal support – namely mothers and college staff – other forms of informal support may emerge for other samples of young adults with temporary statuses. Therefore, scholars should aim to uncover the ways in which young adults with other liminal statuses – like TPS and visa holders – cope with negative emotions. Moreover, scholars should explore the coping behaviors of young adults who are fully undocumented to gain a deeper understanding if receiving informal social support is partially or fully dependent (or not) on the type of status one has. For example, it may be the case that those with temporary statuses feel more comfortable disclosing their status than those who are undocumented. This may lead to the formation of informal social networks – especially within universities. This empirical inquiry would greatly benefit our understanding of the role of legal status in the forms of coping mechanisms accessible – and leveraged – by young adults without citizenship.

In addition, future studies should focus on contextual factors – like time and place – to better understand how larger structural forces shape the emotional well-being and coping mechanisms of young adults who navigate the transition to adulthood in liminal legality. While

this dissertation draws on the lived experiences of DACA recipients living in Florida, a conservative, anti-immigrant state context, it is not known if, and to what extent, the political and social conditions in Florida shaped their emotional well-being and coping strategies. While beyond the scope of this project, scholars should explore how making the transition to adulthood in a strict state context may influence the experience of undocumented young adults protected under DACA. In the following section, I offer insight into how this dissertation, and the stories of young adults with DACA, complicate the traditional vision of how young adults should, and do, make the transition into adulthood.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY

Transition to Adulthood

Despite its wide application, the transition to adulthood framework was developed according to the white middle class normative standard. Traditionally, young adults are expected to break away from their families and gain independence by meeting a series of milestones: leaving the family home, going to college, getting a job, getting married, and becoming a parent (Arnett 2014; Settersten, Ottusch, and Schneider 2015). While it appears as a normative expectation, this prescription is not always attainable, nor even always desired, for many groups of people. Over the years, scholars have drawn attention to how young adults from marginalized backgrounds experience this critical period in their life course. Specifically, prior studies have found that the pathway to adulthood does not follow the "normative" standard for young adults from lower class backgrounds (Lareau 2011), racial and ethnic minorities (Lee et al. 2018), and immigrants (Aranda, Vaquera and Castañeda 2021).

Findings from this dissertation project complexify largely monolithic conversations about the transition to adulthood and provide a foundation for theoretical redevelopment. In the case of

DACA recipients, one example of a disadvantaged population, their liminal status increases opportunities to meet important milestones to adulthood (e.g., work permit, college), yet they often remain enmeshed within their families (Aranda, Vaquera and Castañeda 2021). While legal status complicated life after high school, many young adults in this study went to college, got a job, and a few even started families of their own. Therefore, young adults with DACA can – and do – make the transition into adulthood. However, in its current form, the transitions to adulthood framework is inadequate for explaining how young adults without citizenship navigate this critical juncture in their life-course. Through this dissertation research, it is clear that young adults with DACA often live in the family home well into young adulthood - as they provide critical forms of caregiving and financial support to their families (Siemons et al. 2017). Moreover, they tend to rely on their families – and specifically – parents support when making important decisions, like seeing professional support for mental health needs. Families, then, play a pivotal role in the lives of DACA recipients and influence how they make the transition into adulthood. It can be argued, then, that the transition to adulthood for young adults with DACA is a collaborative (vs. independent) endeavor. Future work should follow young adults over the life-course to better understand how this family enmeshment unfolds over time. It would be particularly beneficial to explore the ways in which family patterns shift (if at all) after young adults make the transition to adulthood. This empirical inquiry would offer much needed insight into the life trajectories of DACA recipients and when, and under what circumstances, they move out of the family home, get married, and have children.

In addition to contributions to scholarship and theory, findings from this dissertation have important policy implications. The following section details how recent, ongoing, and future bills

(if passed) will be detrimental to the emotional well-being and limit positive coping behaviors of DACA recipients.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Nationwide, we are witnessing an attack on human rights. Over the past few years, the anti-immigrant actions of the former Trump administration, the 2017 DACA recission, and court cases contesting the legitimacy of DACA, have threatened the security of immigrants living in the U.S. Even now, federal inaction to secure a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients and state-level policies that target DEI initiatives and course curriculum within universities offer just two examples of how policies jeopardize the lives and well-being of all people, citizens, and non-citizens alike, who don't fit neatly into the white dominant narrative. For young adults without citizenship, the conservative and exclusionary political agendas being pushed will likely have devastating consequences on their emotional health.

As this dissertation reveals, informal social support networks play a pivotal role in the ability for DACA recipients to manage and overcome negative emotions. Young adults in this study emphasize the importance of not only the availability of resources but the critical role that key people play in their ability to cope with, and overcome, negative emotions – especially parents and college staff. With the increasingly anti-immigrant political climate, it is possible that parents may become less and less inclined to support their children in seeking formal support services. For instance, a proposed bill in Florida – SB 1718 – would require hospitals to report the legal status of immigrants – which may discourage people from seeking health care services. Given the strong influence of parents on the health care seeking behaviors of young adults with DACA, this bill (if passed) may further isolate young adults from seeking formal mental health services.

Moreover, the attack on DEI programs in universities and placing restrictions on professors as to prevent the teaching of "woke topics" will have serious consequences for immigrant students. For example, eliminating DEI initiatives will mean that existing supports for undocumented students – including those with DACA – will disappear. Without the availability of programs and resources for undocumented students, even immigrant friendly campus climates may shift – resulting in college staff feeling unable to support these students in extremely vulnerable positions. Provided how critical informal support networks in college were to young adults in this study, losing on-campus resources will eliminate a key form of support young adults leverage to manage negative emotions.

These anti-immigrant and exclusionary policies would have far-reaching consequences in the lives of disadvantaged populations, including those without U.S. citizenship. For young adults without citizenship, these policies (among others) would make an already difficult transition to adulthood even more challenging. If enacted, these policies may dramatically alter the reception of immigrant young adults on college campuses, in the workplace, and even impact their interpersonal and romantic relationships. Therefore, scholars and key stakeholders invested in immigration policy and reform – like federal and state government officials, university administrators, and employers (Ballard et al. 2016) must collectively fight against punitive policies that jeopardize the lives and well of all young adults without permanent legal status, including those with DACA.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While the future of immigration laws and policies remain in a constant state of flux, there is no doubt that punitive immigration policies, anti-DEI initiatives, and extreme conservative ideologies will only further marginalize young adults who already navigate the transition to

adulthood on the margins of legality. Moreover, these policies not only discriminate against those deemed as "others", but also criminalizes allies. For instance, SB 1718 is a Florida Senate bill advancing in the legislature. It would criminalize anyone who lends aid (e.g., providing shelter, driving family member to appointments) to undocumented individuals in Florida – resulting in felony charges (Aranda 2023). This bill represents just one of many governmental efforts to exercise control over immigrant populations without regard to the devastating impact on the lives of immigrants – and now even the lives of citizens. Faced with the impending threat of being prosecuted for helping undocumented individuals, even members of their own family, will citizens stop providing critical forms of support? Who will be left to provide them with the critical support needed to help them manage, and overcome, the heavy emotional burden they carry? Without support, it is likely that young adults with DACA will be pushed further into the shadows as their mental health needs go unaddressed. It is my hope that this dissertation inspires scholars, policymakers, and the general public to consider the detrimental impact of xenophobic, racist, and exclusionary policies on the emotional well-being of young adults who – for all but their legal status – are American in every way that counts.

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

May 17, 2017

Elizabeth Aranda, PhD
Sociology
Tampa, FL

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00030846
Title: Ontological Security in Uncertain Times: Legal Status and the Social and Emotional Well-Being of Undocumented Young Adults
NSF proposal 1729396

Study Approval Period: 5/17/2017 to 5/17/2018

Dear Dr. Aranda:

On 5/17/2017, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Research Protocol.docx

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
Verbal Consent Version 1.docx

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved. The Verbal Consent is not a stamped form.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research

through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

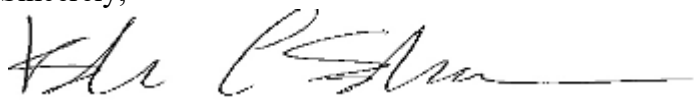
(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your study qualifies for a waiver of the requirements for the documentation of informed consent as outlined in the federal regulations at 45CFR46.117(c) which states that an IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it finds either: (1) That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or (2) That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. (Verbal Consent)

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval via an amendment. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) calendar days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,



Appendix B: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Continuing Review Approval

May 17, 2022

Elizabeth Aranda
Sociology
Tampa, FL

Dear Dr. Elizabeth Aranda:

On 5/13/2022, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Continuing Review
IRB ID:	Pro00030846_CR000003
Review Type:	Expedited 6 and 7
Title:	Ontological Security in Uncertain Times: Legal Status and the Social and Emotional Well-Being of Undocumented Young AdultsNSF proposal 1729396
Funding:	National Science Foundation
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Approved Protocol and Consent(s)/Assent(s):	• Local Context Review Form_Vaquera.pdf; • Research Protocol Version 3 clean copy rev. 2.9.19.docx; • Research Protocol Version 4 clean copy 2.18.21.docx; • Research Protocol Version 4 track changes 2.18.21.docx; • consent for re-interviews; • New SB Survey Consent 2-15-20 with clean copy.pdf; • Verbal Consent Version 1 re interviews 2-26-20 clean copy.pdf; • Verbal Consent Version 2 2-15-20 clean copy.pdf; • Verbal Consent Version 3 2-26-21 clean copy.pdf; • Verbal Consent Version 3 2-26-21 clean copy.pdf; Approved study documents can be found under the 'Documents' tab in the main study workspace. Use the stamped consent found under the 'Last Finalized' column under the 'Documents' tab.

The IRB approved the protocol from 5/13/2022 to 5/13/2023. Within 45 days of 5/13/2023, submit a continuing review/study closure request in BullsIRB by clicking Create Modification/CR.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 5/13/2023, approval of this protocol expires on that date.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Andi Encinas

Appendix C: Interview Guide

[Thank them for agreeing to be interviewed and check if recorder is running]

To begin, I want to ask you some questions about you and your family.

I. BACKGROUND AND MIGRATION

1. What is your gender: ___Female ___Male _ ___ Other (fill in): _____

2. Year and Place of birth: _____ _____

3. Where do you currently live (neighborhood)?
_____

4. What are the cross streets of residence (main streets close to where they live)?

5. How long have you lived there?)
_____

5. What is your marital status? _____

6. Who resides in your home (if family members, note relationship to responding, ages, and legal status of each); if they are in college and live with roommates, ask who resided in home before they went to college:
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

7. Do you have children? If so, what was the year they were born and what was their place of birth?
_____
_____

8. Could you tell me a short version of your life story? Start with when and where you were born, and how you and your family got to this country.
   Probe for:

   a. Who was first to come? When did others arrive?
   b. If family members migrated at different times: Was this challenging in any way?

c. What were the reasons why your family left your home country?
d. How was the journey, any difficulties along the way?
e. Why choose [Florida, etc.] as destination?

(Make sure you have enough information to fill out the following): List the years and reasons for moving, beginning with the move from your country and including any moves within the United States (or back to your country):

Destination

Reasons

From:_____ To:_____ _____ _____
_____
From:_____ To:_____ _____ _____
_____

II. LIFE IN THE U.S.

1. Could you describe how life has been for you and your family in the U.S.?
Probe for: challenges that when they first arrived (starting school in new country, language issues, making friends, etc.). IF TOO YOUNG TO REMEMBER, ASK ABOUT THEIR FAMILY'S CHALLENGES WHEN THEY FIRST ARRIVED. Are any of these hardships still ongoing?

2. What is your parents' educational background?

3. What is the occupation of your parents (are they currently employed)?

4. How well do you speak, understand, read, and write English and _____? Please place an "X" in the appropriate categories.

English:

Speak: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____
Understand: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____
Read: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____
Write: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____

Other language (please specify): _____

Speak: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____

Understand: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____

Read: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____

Write: Not at all ____ Not Well ____ Well ____ Very Well ____

5. What language(s) to you speak at home? _____

III. NEIGHBORHOODS (FORMER AND CURRENT)

1. Can you tell me about the neighborhood where you grew up? What was it like being undocumented there? Probe for:
    a. Were there other people in your neighborhood that were undocumented?
    b. Ethnic or racial tensions in the neighborhood (probe for details)

2. Could you describe the area where you live now? (If they live on campus, probe for most recent neighborhood) What is it like for undocumented people living there? Can you tell me about some of the best aspects of living where you live now? Some of the worst?

Probe for what services are nearby, including stores and medical; whether there's public transportation; other characteristics of the neighborhood such as what race/ethnic groups live in the neighborhood and if there are racial/ethnic tensions

IV. DISCOVERY OF STATUS

1. What is your immigration status? _____

2. How did you come to the U.S (with a visa, what kind, crossing the border)? Do you still have this or has your status changed?

3. Do you have any pending applications? Which one? e.g. asylum, permanent residency, TPS, DACA?
4. (If DACAmented) In what year did you first get DACA (or TPS)?_____

5. When does your DACA (or TPS) expire? _____

6. *How do you describe your immigration status to others?* Do you (or did you) consider yourself "undocumented"?

7. Can you tell me about how you found out you were undocumented? Was it a specific event, or more like a gradual realization?

Probe for details:

a. How did you feel when you realized or understood you were undocumented?
b. Are you open with people about your undocumented status?

(if YES): Who was the 1st person you trusted with this information? Do you distinctly remember making the specific decision to share? How you explained your situation to them? How did sharing your status change you or the way you saw yourself? How did sharing your status shape your relationships with others?

(if NO): Why are you not open about your status with others? How do you feel about keeping your undocumented status a secret?

c. What effect has legal status had on your relationships? Probe: family, friends, others

8. Have you ever had to change your daily routine or responsibilities because of fear that police or immigration might stop you? What about people in your family? (Probe: How does this make you feel? Probe for fear of driving and what they do in response)

9. Do you know anyone who has been deported or detained? Can you tell us about what happened? How does knowing this make you feel?

10. Have you ever thought about what would happen if you were detained or deported?
    a. How often do you think about this? (Probe: Is this constant or sporadic?)
    b. How does this make you feel? (Probe: Does this affect their performance at school and work? Does this affect their social life?)
    c. Do you have a plan in place in case this happens? What about family members?

V. EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

1. Who or what do you trust in? What are the things that you can count on?

2. Have you had any experiences with rejection, loneliness, or shame? Can you tell me about a time when you felt that way?

3. Have you ever felt like others judge you? Can you provide some examples? Please explain.

4. When you are feeling down, or if you are worrying, what do you do to try to overcome these feelings? (probe about whether they talk to specific people)

5. What do you do to take care of yourself? How often do you do these things?

6. How about when you have a difficult time overcoming these negative feelings? Have these feelings been so bad that they made you think about harming your body? (Probe for whether they have harmed or neglected themselves and their body).
    a. IF YES: Can you tell me a little bit about that? Did anyone in your life become aware of this? Were they helpful?

7. What excites you most about your future? Is there a part of you that feels hopeless about the future?

8. Tell me about a time when you felt happy and in control of your life? (probe for details)

VI. IMMIGRATION

1. Thinking of the current political climate, how has life been for you as an immigrant since the last presidential election? Probe for:
    a. Has this impacted your (of your family's) wellbeing?
    b. Has this impacted your perception of the United States?
    c. Has it impacted your educational goals, work, or social life?

2. When there are discussions about immigration in the media, how do they make you feel? How do they affect your family? Probe for examples, and whether they are talking about Spanish or English language media.

3. Do you trust government to do what's right for immigrants (probe)?

4. [SELECT THE FOLLOWING DEPENDING ON THEIR CURRENT STATUS] –SKIP IF NOTHING APPLIES
    a. DACA RECIPIENT: How did you feel when the ending of DACA announcement was made? What would it be like for you if you lost your work permit? In what ways will not having DACA change your life on a day-to-day basis? Do you have an idea of what you will do? Are you making different decisions knowing this may be a possibility?

    b. TPS RECIPIENT: What comes to mind when you think about the possibility of TPS ending, how do you feel? What would it be like for you if you lost your work permit? In what ways will not having TPS change your life on a day-to-day basis? Do you have an idea of what you will do? Are you making different decisions knowing this may be a possibility?

    c. CASE PENDING FOR ASYLUM, VAWA, T or U VISA: What would it be like if you lost your case? Do you have an idea of what you will do? Are you making different decisions knowing this may be a possibility?

    d. PERMANENT RESIDENCY STATUS PENDING OR RECENTLY APPROVED (i.e., petition through a spouse, sibling, or parent): In what ways has your life changed (or do you anticipate it changing)? How do you feel about this (potential) change in status?

VII. RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY

1. We would like to hear about your family now—what your relationships with your family members like?

2. Who do you consider your "family" to be? (if there are any obvious omissions e.g. a father or mother, probe for information, but encourage a wide range of subjective responses; ask whether parents are together, if not, probe for why they divorced)

3. Can you describe how you get along with each of your parents? Your siblings? (probe for other family members and if there are any conflictual relationships and reasons why)

4. Who do you feel you can trust in your life? *What about them makes you trust them?* (PROBE FOR FRIEND AND FAMILY OR ANY CLOSE SIGNIFICANT OTHERS E.G. MENTORS)

5. Has anything ever happened in your life where you began to doubt the people you trust in your life? Can you tell us about that? (probe for details and additional examples)

6. Are there any responsibilities you take on for your family? Probe: What are they? (for example, driving, putting bills or loans in their name)

7. Have these changed since DACA (or other status change)? How do you feel about this (Is it added pressure, or time-consuming (probe how)? Do you worry about your family (when and why)?

8. *Are there any major conflicts, problems, or issues in your family? (probe for details about the nature of the problem and for how it has affected participant)*

9. Do you have relatives back in [country of origin]? (Probe for who and how close a relationship it is; Do they stay in touch? If not, why not? How do they maintain contact? How do they feel during these conversations?)

10. Would you ever consider moving there [back to home country]? Why or why not?

11. Where is "home" for you, that is, where do you think you belong? Why?

VIII. IDENTITY:

1. How would you describe your identity? [Pause to see if they use nationality/race/ethnicity, if not, then ask:] What about in terms of nationality, race, or ethnicity?

2. Could you tell me about a time or times where you felt you treated differently because of your background? Or discriminated against? Could you give me an example of a situation when you experienced this? Are there any other instances where this happened?

3. *Do you know what the term "DREAMer" means? (IF NO: skip rest of question) IF YES: Do you consider yourself a DREAMer? How do you feel about the term DREAMer? (probe for how they define the term).*

IX. EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCES AT SCHOOL

1. List the schools you have attended, their locations and approximate dates of attendance, and the highest level of education attained:

School	Location	Dates attended	Level of Education attained

2. Tell me about what it was like being undocumented and going to school in the U.S.

3. What are your goals and how confident are you that you will achieve your goals? What drives you?

4. Did you ever have any problems at school because of your undocumented status? If yes, can you tell me about them? (How did you handle this/these problems? How did your family, friends, or teachers support you? (probe if ever considered dropping out and reasons)

5. Did being undocumented ever impact your friendships, dating, or romantic relationships? (Probe: how? did you tell your close friends/relationships? If so, how did they react?)

X. WORK and/or STUDENT:

1. You told me that you (WORK AND/OR GO TO SCHOOL). Can you tell me about your (job and/or major), how you got into it, how do you like it? Probe:
    a. IF WORKS: What kind of job do you have? How long have you been working there? How did you get that job (any assistance from anyone? probe if they are happy in that job; do they intend to stay there?) Are there any challenges you face at work because of your status?
    b. IF A STUDENT: Can you tell me what year or grade you are in? What are you studying/what is your major (if college)? Why did you choose that?
    c. What are you goals for the future? What is the likelihood that you see your goals being achieved? How does that make you feel?

2. If works, ask: What was your estimated personal (individual) monthly income last year (hourly wage or bracket; how many hours a week they work)? _____

3. Do you contribute to your family's household income? How regularly, and how much? _____

4. Does your job [if they don't work, ask about their parents jobs] pay you enough, or do you or your family struggle to pay your bills every month?

5. *Comparing last year's income to the income of previous years, do you feel you (or your family) did better, worse, or the same economically? Please explain.*

XI. TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

1. Thinking about your life after high school, how has it been? Have you been able to build a life for yourself, and how? (If not out of high school, what are your plans for when you graduate?)

2. *When you have an important decision to make, how do you go about it? Do you make it on your own, do you consult with others (who)? Can tell me about a time you had to make an important decision, and how you figured out what to do? (probe for independence; who makes the decisions in their lives; probe for gender)*

3. (If they still live with their parents): Have you ever thought of moving out on your own? (probe to see if they wish to be more independent). What is the upside of living with your parents? (probe for what keeps them there and how do they feel about living with their parents).

4. Are you in a romantic relationship? IF YES: ask them to describe what it's like. IF NO, ask if they would like to be in a romantic relationship? (probe for possible things holding them back)

5. *Thinking back on relationships you may have been in in the past, have there ever been problems that made any of these relationships difficult to maintain? Has your undocumented status affected your relationships? How? (probe: if and when they disclosed their status, how their partner reacted at that exact moment, if there was any fallout/consequences)*

6. Has disclosing your undocumented status to previous partners affected how you approach future relationships? (Probe: desire for marriage?) If person doesn't identify as heterosexual, probe for how LGBT identity has presented challenges.

7. What are your goals in life? (probe for educational goals in case not mentioned earlier, as well as goals related to family formation e.g. if they want to have family, kids, spouse)

XII. SOCIAL WELL-BEING (SOCIAL SUPPORT)

1. Would you say you are someone who has many friends? Can you tell me about your closest friends? (probe for how many friends, who they are, what they share in common, how they met, how close they consider them to be; probe for whether undocumented; backgrounds)

2. Is there anyone you look up to? Do you have any mentors, or anyone from school, work, church, or anywhere else who has helped you? (probe for what kind of relationship, if it is social support, or a source of social capital; how did they help – specific examples?)

XIII. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

1. Can you tell me the ways in which you are involved in your community?

2. What groups do you belong to? (e.g., religion/church, sport teams, community or campus organizations) Probe: What does working with these groups involve? (probe for why they got involved; if religious, probe if they go to church services and how involved they are; probe specifically for involvement in immigrant rights organizations or activities

3. (If they mention religion or god:) Can you tell me about times in your life when you have relied on god or religion?

WE ARE ALMOST DONE! I HAVE A FEW FINAL QUESTIONS:

1. Is there anything about you that I haven't asked you, or you haven't told me about, but that you think is important for me to really understand your life?

2. What was the hardest part of this interview for you? Would you suggest we approach this part differently?

3. Do you have any questions for me? They can be about the project, or about my connection to this research, or what we will do with the data.

Appendix D: Re-Interview Guide

[Thank them for agreeing to be re-interviewed and check if recorder is running]

[Review Interview at Time 1 and fill in information for each section to acknowledge their original answers. Then proceed to update information on the questions below.

SECTION I: CORONAVIRUS AND CATCHING UP

1. How are things going for you and your family right now, with the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic? Can you tell me what went through your mind when you learned about it? How have you been feeling about it?

2. What has the experience of this public health crisis been like for you given your undocumented status?

3. Last time we spoke you mentioned that [summarize what they said regarding their immigration status]. How have your feelings about your immigration status changed since the start of this public health crisis?

4. Thanks for sharing that with me. For the interview, our questions will be focusing on your experiences as a person with undocumented status in the United States. Before we move on, I want to make sure you still feel comfortable proceeding with the interview?

5. We last talked in [_____]What has happened in your life since our interview?

SECTION II: BACKGROUND

1. When we first interviewed you on [date] _____, you lived in_____. Do you still live there?

[if YES, then skip questions 2-5.]
[If NO, ask questions 2-5]

2. *Where do you currently live (neighborhood)?*

3. *What are the cross streets of residence (main streets close to where they live)?*

4. *How long have you lived there?*

5. *What prompted your move?*

6. When we last spoke, you lived with [ ]. Has this changed? Probe for details.

7. Last time we talked you were_____ (married, single, etc.) Is that still the case? [if not, then probe].
8. When we last met, **you had/didn't have** children. Has that changed?

9. **When we first spoke, your immigration status was _____. Is that still the same? Do you have any pending applications?**

10. When does your DACA (or TPS) expire [or if they were undocumented did they get DACA or something else?] How does that make you feel?

11. Last time we spoke you had completed [Record highest level of education]. Have you continued studying since then?

SECTION III: NEIGHBORHOOD (CURRENT)

1. Could you describe the area where you live now? (If they live on campus, probe for most recent neighborhood)

2. What is it like for undocumented people living there?

3. Can you tell me about some of the best aspects of living where you live now? Some of the worst? [Probe for what services are nearby, including stores and medical; public transportation; other characteristics such as what race/ethnic groups live in the neighborhood and if there are racial/ethnic tensions]

SECTION IV: CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE

1. **Thinking of the current political climate, how has life been for you as an immigrant since we last spoke?** Probe for:
    a. Has this impacted your (of your family's) wellbeing?
    b. Has this impacted your perception of the United States?
    c. Has it impacted your educational goals, work, or social life?

2. Has being undocumented had an impact on your friendships since we last talked?

3. Does having DACA help you to feel safe? Or do you fear deportation or something else?

4. When we last talked, you mentioned you [**had not/ had**] to change your daily routine for fear of being stopped. Is this still the case?
    a. What about people in your family? (Probe: How does this make you feel? Probe for fear of driving)
    b. What do you do in response? (probe for things that might put them at risk for being stopped or detained)

5. Since we last talked, do you know anyone who has been deported or detained? Can you tell us about what happened? How does knowing this make you feel?

6. Last time you said you **had not/had** thought about what would happen if you were detained or deported. Has this changed? (probe why or why not and if they have a **plan**, what does it consist of)
    a. How often do you think about this? (Probe: Is this constant or sporadic?)
    b. How does this make you feel? (Probe: Does this affect their performance at school and work? Does this affect their social life?)

7. For the next Presidential election: what are your hopes and fears? What do you think you'll do in terms of your immigration status and your future if the President gets re-elected? How will you feel if he does not get re-elected?

SECTION V: LEGAL STATUS AND DAILY LIFE

1. Have you been following what has been happening with DACA (or TPS) in the news?

[IF YES, then ask:]

a. Where do you get your information?
b. How has the news made you feel?

[If no: ask what they know and whether it has affected their lives in any way]

2. How has what's going on with DACA [or TPS/ or immigration in general] affected any of your plans since we last spoke? (Probe for reasons why if plans have changed; if they have not changed, probe for what keeps them on track.)

3. Have the changes with DACA and the anti-immigration politics make you doubt the people and things you used to trust in your life?

[IF YES]: Has anything in particular made you lose this trust (if trust is reported to be lost)? [IF NO]: what do you think helps you maintain trust in people and things?

SECTION VI: EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

1. Nowadays, who or what do you trust in? What are the things that you can count on?

2. Have you had any experiences with rejection, loneliness, or shame in recent times (since we last spoke)? Can you tell me about a time when you felt that way since we last talked?

3. Have you ever felt like others judge you? Can you provide some recent examples? Please explain.

4. When you are feeling down, or if you are worrying, what do you do to try to overcome these feelings and take care of yourself? (probe about whether they talk to specific people).

5. Last time we spoke, you shared that you **had not/had** had a difficult time overcoming negative feelings. Is this still the case?

6. Last time we spoke, you mentioned these feelings **had not/had** been so bad that they made you think about harming your body. Since we last spoke, has this changed? (Probe for whether they have harmed or neglected themselves and their body since last interview).
    a. IF YES: Can you tell me a little bit about that? Did anyone in your life become aware of this? Were they helpful?

7. Is there a part of you that feels hopeless about the future?

8. Tell me about a recent time when you felt happy and in control of your life? (probe for details) What excites you most about your future?

SECTION VII: RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY

1. Last time we spoke you described how you get along with each of your parents and siblings. You said [SUMMARIZE WHAT THEY SAID]. How have any of these relationships changed since then? (Probe for reasons if yes).

2. When we last spoke you mentioned a few responsibilities you took on for your family such as _____ Have these changed since we last talked? How do you feel about this? Is it added pressure, or time-consuming? (probe how) Do you worry about your family (when and why)?

3. [IF SINGLE]: Would you like to be in a romantic relationship? (probe for things holding them back)

4. [IF in a relationship]: Can you tell me a bit about your relationship? Has your legal status interfered in your relationship? [Probe partners legal status and if partner knows of their legal status]

5. [IF they have children]: What has the experience of having children while undocumented been like?

6. In our last interview, you said you **would/would not return** to live to your country of origin. Now, Would you ever consider moving there [back to home country]? Why or why not?

7. Where is "home" for you, that is, where do you think you belong? Why?

SECTION VIII: IDENTITY

1. Now I'm going to show you a chart with different skin tones. Can you tell me which number best describes (matches? Approximates?) your skin tone?
2. How would you describe your identity? [Pause to see if they use nationality/race/ethnicity, if not, then ask:] What about in terms of nationality, race, or ethnicity?

3. Since we last spoke, has there been a time or times where you felt you treated differently because of your background? Or discriminated against? Could you give me an example of a situation when you experienced this? (Probe for whether its related to ethnicity, race, gender, or legal status or some other identity).

SECTION IX: WORK AND/OR STUDENT

1. You told me that you (Record whether they work and/or go to school). Is this still the same?

[If Yes and nothing has changed, then skip or do abbreviated version of questions 2-5].

[If No, ask questions 2-5]:

2. Can you tell me about your current (job and/or major), how you got into it, how do you like it? Probe:

   d. IF WORKS: What kind of job do you have? How long have you been working there? How did you get that job (any assistance from anyone? probe if they are happy in that job; do they intend to stay there?) Are there any challenges you face at work because of your status?
   e. IF A STUDENT: Can you tell me what year or grade you are in? What are you studying/what is your major (if college)? Why did you choose that?

3. If works, ask: What was your estimated personal (individual) monthly income last year (hourly wage or bracket; how many hours a week they work)? _____

4. Do you currently contribute to your family's household income? How regularly, and how much? _____

5. Comparing this year's income to the income of previous years, do you feel you (or your family) did better, worse, or the same economically? Please explain.

SECTION X: TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

1. Last time we spoke about how you make important decisions. You said [summarize what they said.] Given the current political climate, has your decision-making process changed?

2. What are your current goals? What is the likelihood that you see your goals being achieved? How does that make you feel?

3. Have any of your educational plans changed since we last talked? (remind them of what they were aiming to do as expressed in last interview)

SECTION XI: CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

1. In terms of community involvement, last time we spoke you mentioned [recap from original interview info on their civic engagement, particularly in terms of immigrant organizations]

2. [If involved]: Are you still involved in the immigrant organization [probe for how it has helped or why or why not still involved].

3. [If not involved]: Have you thought of getting involved with an immigrant advocacy organization? [probe for why or why not or if they did get involved after the interview, probe for how it's affected their lives]

WE ARE ALMOST DONE! I HAVE A FEW FINAL QUESTIONS

1. Is there anything about you that I haven't asked you, or you haven't told me about, but that you think is important for me to really understand your life?

2. What was the hardest part of this interview for you? Would you suggest we approach this part differently?

3. Do you have any questions for me? They can be about the project, or about my connection to this research, or what we will do with the data.

Appendix E: Emotional Well-Being Scale

The following questions ask about how you have been feeling during the past 30 days. For each question, please tell me which of these answers best describes how often you had this feeling.

	All the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
1. …nervous?	1	2	3	4	5
2. …hopeless?	1	2	3	4	5
3. …restless or fidgety?	1	2	3	4	5
4. …so depressed that nothing could cheer you up?	1	2	3	4	5
5. …that everything was an effort?	1	2	3	4	5
6. …worthless?	1	2	3	4	5

Appendix F: Locus of Control Scale

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.							
Agree Strongly		Somewhat	A little	Don't know	A little	Somewhat	Disagree Strongly
s. There is little I can do to change the important things in my life.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
t. I often feel helpless in dealing with theproblems of life.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
u. I can do just about anything I really set mymind to.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
v. Other people determine most of what I can and cannot do.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
w. What happens in my life is often beyond mycontrol.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
x. When I really want to do something, I usuallyfind a way to succeed at it.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
y. There are many things that interfere withwhat I want to do.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
z. Whether or not I am able to get what I wantis in my own hands.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
aa. I have little control over the things thathappen to me.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
bb. There is really no way I can solve the problems I have.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
cc. I sometimes feel I am being pushed around in my life.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
dd. What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me.	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

Appendix G: Social Belonging Scale

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.							
	Agree			Don't know	Disagree		
	Strongly	Somewhat	A little		A little	Somewhat	Strongly
a. The world is too complex for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
b. I don't feel I belong to anything I'd call a community.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c. People who do a favor expect nothing in return.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d. I have something valuable to give to the world.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e. The world is becoming a better place for everyone.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
f. I feel close to other people in my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
g. My daily activities do not create anything worthwhile for my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
h. I cannot make sense of what's going on in the world.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
i. Society has stopped making progress.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
j. People do not care about other people's problems.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
k. My community is a source of comfort.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
l. "I find it easy to predict what will happen next in society"	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
m. Society isn't improving for people like me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
n. I believe that people are kind.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
o. I have nothing important to contribute to society.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix H: Robustness Checks

Appendix H. Mean Comparisons between Survey and Interview Data

Variable	Survey ($N = 55$)	Interview ($N = 51$)
Dependent Variable		
Emotional Well-Being (M, SD)	18.09 (5.93)	20.98 (4.64)
Independent Variables		
Personal Mastery (M, SD)	21.40 (4.93)	24.08 (4.05)
Perceived Constraints (M, SD)	32.08 (12)	29.10 (10.23)
Social Belonging (M, SD)	68.05 (12.20)	71.21 (10.85)
Socio-Demographics		
Female	74.5% (35)	54.9% (28)
Age (Mean, SD)	22.67 (3.10)	23.84 (3.67)
Years in the U.S. (M, SD)	17.07 (3.04)	18.63 (3.71)
Highest Education Level (M, SD)	3.53 (.89)	2.84 (.67)
Grade School or Less	2% (1)	2% (1)
High school	8.2% (4)	23.5% (12)
Some college	36.7% (18)	64.7% (33)
College Graduate	40.8% (20)	7.8% (4)
Postgraduate	10.9% (6)	2% (1)